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ABSTRACT

The often-competing issues that accompany high-stakes testing pose challenges for even the best and most experienced principals. For example, time allotted for teaching test-taking skills and practice is sometimes "stolen" from science and social-studies courses. Some parents are concerned that students are missing out on a critical part of their education as a result. This publication discusses many of the elements surrounding high-stakes testing. Its focus is on providing the school leader with tools to make it a less stressful and more successful situation for staff and students. Topics include test-preparation issues, the pros and cons of test prep, how much time should be spent, and what approaches will be most helpful to students. Tips are given on how teachers can use classroom activities, homework, and ongoing assessment practices to help students perform well on tests. Examples are given of what schools have learned from experience about providing a calm, structured environment that decreases student stress. Other issues discussed are children with special needs, integrating assessment and instruction in ways that support student learning, and effectively communicating test results to parents and enlisting assistance from parents. (Contains 87 references.) (RT)

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Essentials for Principals

Meeting the Challenges of High-Stakes Testing

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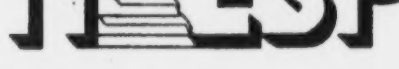
Meeting the Challenges of High-Stakes Testing



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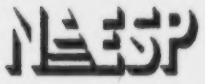

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The 28,500 members of the National Association of Elementary School Principals provide administrative and instructional leadership for public and private elementary and middle schools throughout the United States, Canada, and overseas. Founded in 1921, NAESP is today a vigorously independent professional association with its own headquarters building in Alexandria, Virginia, just across the Potomac River from the nation's capital. From this special vantage point, NAESP conveys the unique perspective of the elementary and middle school principal to the highest policy councils of our national government. Through national and regional meetings, award-winning publications, and joint efforts with its 50 state affiliates, NAESP is a strong advocate both for its members and for the 33 million American children enrolled in preschool, kindergarten, and grades 1 through 8.

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Foreword

High-stakes testing has implications for every aspect of the principal's job—working with teachers, ensuring that students all receive a high-quality education, communicating with parents, etc. In many states and communities today, the testing and accountability movement has created an environment that could best be described as stressful for all concerned. For this reason, *Meeting the Challenges of High-Stakes Testing* was selected as the third topic in the *Essentials for Principals* series published by the National Association of Elementary School Principals in partnership with Educational Research Service.

While the nature of the tests and the implications for students, schools, and staff vary from state to state, there are still common issues to address. For example, today's principals need to be knowledgeable about issues related to high-stakes testing. As one chapter makes clear, these issues are complex, and there are no easy answers. But an understanding of the issues can help a school in its discussions about how to prepare students for the tests, including how to balance test preparation with other instruction. As another example, schools are grappling with questions related to test preparation: what type? how much?

For many schools, high-stakes testing and the related standards have become the organizing forces around which the life of the school revolves. Decisions that impact students and staff in profound ways need to be made on an almost daily basis about: test preparation, alignment of curriculum and instruction with the expectations of the test, providing additional help for students who need it, and ensuring that all teachers are providing the instruction needed for students to do well on the tests. More than ever, principals need to be strong instructional leaders as well as managers of the complex processes these activities require.

This *Essentials* is intended to provide you with information—based on research and successful practice—to assist you in providing leadership for your school in its efforts to meet the challenges of high-stakes testing.

Vincent L. Ferrandino
Executive Director
National Association of Elementary School Principals

About this *Essentials for Principals* Publication

Every principal begins the job wanting all the students in his or her school to achieve at high levels. But what many of today's principals didn't count on when they first moved into the position is the current emphasis on high-stakes testing and accountability. The often-competing issues that accompany high-stakes testing pose challenges for even the best and most experienced principals.

For example, state-mandated tests may focus on basic skills, and the expectation is that all children will do well. To accomplish this, the school's staff may decide that students need to be taught test-taking skills and given time to practice. With no "free" time available in the school day, time for this is sometimes "stolen" from science and social studies. The result in many schools is concern expressed by a highly vocal group of parents that the students are missing out on a critical part of their education. Trying to address everyone's concerns takes leadership, management skills, and diplomacy on the part of the principal.

This *Essentials* publication discusses many of the complicated and sometimes troubling elements surrounding high-stakes testing, but it is not meant to be merely a litany of problems. Instead, the focus is on providing you with tools to make it a less stressful and more successful situation for you, your staff, and your students.

A chapter on test preparation addresses issues that many schools are facing. What are the pros and cons of test prep? How much time should we spend? What approaches will be most helpful to our students? While you and your staff will need to design a program that meets the specific needs of your students, the information—based on research and best practice—will provide you with valuable resources for your discussion and planning.

Teachers are key to any school's efforts to ensure that students do well on high-stakes tests. The chapter "Preparing Teachers for Testing" provides many helpful tips

Some of the challenges:

- Keeping the real purposes in mind
- Helping all students do well on tests
- Integrating test preparation into curriculum and instruction
- Striking a balance in what is taught
- Using test results as data for instructional improvement
- Communicating effectively with parents

about how teachers can use classroom activities, homework, and ongoing assessment practices to help students perform well on high-stakes tests. The main point of the chapter is that teachers can best prepare their students for high-stakes tests by using good instructional practices throughout the year.

How you and your staff handle test administration day itself can make a difference in how well your students perform. A chapter on helping students do their best offers examples of what other schools have learned from experience about providing a calm, structured environment that decreases student stress.

Accommodations and alternative assessments for children with special needs are the focus of the next chapter. Current federal law addresses this issue specifically, and federal guidelines are thus presented here, along with accommodations that may be used for students with disabilities as well as limited English proficient students.

One of the critical challenges for today's principals and teachers is how to make testing-related activities educationally productive for all children. To support you in your efforts, an important section in this guide talks about integrating assessment and instruction in ways that support student learning.

Finally, as the school leader, you will take the lead in communicating test results to parents—and in enlisting their assistance in helping your students prepare for the tests. This guide would have been incomplete without information on what parents want to know and how to effectively communicate it to them.

NAESP Platform 2000-2001

NAESP believes that children have diverse abilities and learning potential that the schools should identify and develop. Educators, parents, and children need fair and effective assessment processes that can be used for diagnosing and prescribing the needs of children.

NAESP believes that some practices of standardized testing, such as the inappropriate use of group intelligence and achievement tests, are detrimental to children and the educational process. NAESP views with concern the misuse of, and dependence on, standardized tests. Because of serious defects in both the content and design of some tests, NAESP believes that the profession needs to place a high priority on developing and implementing multiple and varied processes of assessment that are non-discriminatory and that adequately consider the diverse talents, abilities, and cultural backgrounds of children. In assessing young children, the effective school relies chiefly on continuous observation of individual growth and development rather than relying on comparisons with other children or against an arbitrary set of criteria.

NAESP also believes that, in reporting assessment results to the public, explanations must be included which detail limitations of the instruments used, and test results must be reported in terms broader than single-score national and/or state norms.

NAESP urges that the objectives of the school district's standardized testing program be made public and easily accessible to parents, educators, and children so that all citizens will have an opportunity to understand the purposes of the tests. NAESP does not endorse the publicizing of test results as a means of rating or comparing schools or school districts.

NAESP recognizes that the language and format of standardized tests may be unfamiliar to some students and therefore urges principals to assume leadership in ensuring that children have an opportunity to learn test-taking skills.

NAESP urges principals and their local, state, and national associations to resist the use of standardized testing for purposes that have no apparent educational value and to seek uses of test data in ways that benefit children.

High-Stakes Testing: Complex Issues and No Easy Answers

"Standards represent a contract between the state and parents...that promises to educate their children to this high level. In a standards-based system, it is no longer acceptable to challenge some students and leave the others to muddle through" (Patte Barth 1999, B3).

"It's just remarkable how little care has been taken [in implementing the tests]. It's a fad. It's an incredibly costly fad." Robert M. Hauser, coeditor of a recent National Research Council study of high-stakes tests (Lawrence Hardy 2000).

"Tests have not gone away as a consequence of these decades of complaints by their detractors. In fact, statewide accountability systems have proliferated, and tests are a mainstay of them, because no other indicator of school effectiveness has been so well-defined, so time-tested, and so successfully defended in the courts" (Glynn Ligon 2000, 6).

"Why do we impose this misplaced pressure on children as young as eight years old? When I see what is happening around the country, with more and more states and districts adopting the harsh agenda of high stakes testing policies, I am struck by Bob Chases's comparison of all of these educational trends to the movie, Field of Dreams. In my view, it is as though people are saying, "If we test them, they will perform." In too many places, testing, which is a critical part of systemic educational accountability, has ceased its purpose of measuring educational and school improvement and has become synonymous with it." (Senator Paul Wellstone 2000)

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The debate rages on and on. Standards...accountability for schools and students...high-stakes tests—are they part of a movement that will raise student achievement, provide equal opportunity, and save public schools, or are they a politically motivated "quick-fix" that trivializes learning and gets in the way of real education reform?

This chapter presents a brief overview of the questions currently being debated. It is easy to find reasonable and impassioned arguments on both sides of these questions. It is also important for education leaders to be familiar with these arguments—and especially with the research that supports them—to gain an understanding of the complex issues involved.

Questions Currently Being Debated

Should standards be linked to high-stakes assessments? Even if we can agreed that state and/or national standards are a good thing, is it really necessary to hold schools and students accountable and to mete out rewards or punishments based on test scores?

Yes, say proponents. "States that are serious about closing the achievement gap will need to continue to rely on tests, and the tests will need to be improved over time. Without tests, states have no way of knowing which students and schools are succeeding and which need additional help," says Achieve, Inc., an organization of business and state leaders (2000, 2).

High-stakes testing supporters can point to recent research studies that indicate that state accountability systems with high stakes attached have resulted in improved scores, not only on the state assessments themselves but also on more generalizable achievement measures. For example, a RAND analysis found that some states had made unusually large gains in average NAEP math scores, and suggested that "the most plausible explanation for the remarkable rate of math gains by North Carolina and Texas is the integrated set of policies involving standards, assessments, and accountability that both states implemented in the late 1980s and early 1990s" (RAND 2000, 3)

No, say critics. The limitations of assessments and of accountability models mean that this practice does not, in fact, result in educational improvement. Researcher Linda M. McNeil reviews accountability in Texas, a state held up as a model by many high-stakes testing supporters, and argues that the result has been a narrowing of education (McNeil 2000, 730).

Should high-stakes tests be used as a measure of school quality (to compare schools to each other, assess progress, etc)? Is it fair and/or productive to use assessments in this way?

No, say critics. This practice is neither fair nor productive. It's not fair, because the tests are not a valid measure of educational quality. Regarding the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), which carries consequences for students, teachers, administrators, and board members, W. James Popham asserts, "They have items in there that do a terrible job at measuring school quality. What is being measured is what kids come to school with, not what they learn" (Hoff 1999b, 12).

Most critics would agree with Popham that test scores are a better measure of student background characteristics, particularly socioeconomic status, than of the quality of education provided by the school. Since most state accountability systems use a simple status measure (ie, the percentage of students passing the test) to dispense rewards and sanctions (Linn 2000, 13), the system is patently unfair to schools serving low-income students.

Yes, say proponents. "Educators must buy into the reality that the billions of dollars they spend annually demand a public, objective accounting," says Glynn Ligon. Report card grades and scores on school- or district-developed assessments are not convincing to the general public—"schools' own reports of success are too positive, too subjective" (2000, 1).

Should high-stakes tests be used to make decisions about students? Is this policy effective in helping all students meet high achievement standards?

Yes, say proponents. Standardized tests provide an objective measure of what a student knows and can do. They enable schools to identify students who have not mastered the important content and skills mandated by the state standards, and to provide instruction that will bring these students up to standard.

Maureen Dimarco, vice president for educational and governmental affairs for Riverside Publishing and formerly education advisor to former California Governor Pete Wilson, asserts, "A good norm-referenced test will give you in great detail, skill by skill, a child's strengths and weaknesses." For accountability decisions, "It's going to be your strongest and most objective measure" (Hoff 1999b, 11). Advocates also claim that holding all children to the same standard will create greater educational equity and help to close the achievement gap (Achieve, Inc. 2000, 5).

No, say critics. Those opposed to high-stakes testing directly dispute Achieve's claim, arguing that, on the contrary, emphasis on test scores has led to a new form of discrimination. Researchers have confirmed that teachers in minority schools often

What do parents and the public say?

Opinion polls reveal that there is general, although not universal, support for accountability testing. For example:

- Of the 1,000 registered voters surveyed as part of an NEA-commissioned study, 69 percent agreed that: *Annual student testing is good for education because it assesses student performance and gives parents data to assess their child's school. Without annual testing, many students will fall far behind.*
- However, 27 percent selected this less pro-test option: *Testing students every year is excessive and teachers must often teach only information that helps their students pass the test. Teachers do not have the flexibility they need to really teach, and students often receive a very narrow education* (National Education Association 2001).
- Two-thirds of the parents surveyed by the Association of American Publishers in summer 2000 said that they would like to receive standardized test results for their children in every grade, and 63 percent felt that testing provided specific benefits to parents. Included among these were information about: their children's progress in school, how to help their children improve, and their children's learning in relation to other children (Schroeder 2001).
- While 59 percent of public school parents and 47 percent of the general public say that there is the right amount of testing in elementary and middle school, 20 percent of parents and 21 percent of the general public say that there is "not enough" (The Business Roundtable 2000).
- Fifty-five percent of parents "think that because standardized tests measure important skills and knowledge, 'there is nothing wrong' with spending a significant portion of class time preparing students for these tests, compared to 38 percent who think this is a problem" (Public Agenda 2000).
- Teachers were not so positive. When asked about the effects of testing on instruction, about 30 percent said statewide academic standards have led to just the right amount of teaching that parallels the content of state tests. But nearly seven in 10 said instruction stresses tests "far" or "somewhat" too much. Sixty-six percent also said state assessments were forcing them to concentrate too much on what is tested to the detriment of other important topics (Olson 2001).

spend more time in preparing their students for standardized tests than do teachers in nonminority schools (McNeil 2000; Solomon 1998).

In addition, it is unfair to base life-changing decisions about students on test scores that are prone to error. A report by the National Research Council points out, "Tests are not perfect. Test questions are only a sample of all the questions that could be asked in a given area. Moreover, a test score is not an exact measure of a student's knowledge or skills. A student's score can vary across different versions of a test as a function of the particular sample of questions and/or transitory factors, such as the student's health on the day of the test. Thus, no single test score can be considered a definitive measure of a student's knowledge" (Heubert and Hauser 1999, 3).

Should schools align their curriculum and instructional practices to state assessments in order to raise test scores? Should state-mandated tests, even if aligned with established content standards, be the major guides for curriculum and instruction in local schools?

No, say critics. They cite cases in which the curriculum has been narrowed and instructional approaches have been weakened in the quest for higher test scores. Researcher Linda McNeil found that some students whose scores were rising on the state reading tests were not really able to read better. Rather, they had improved in their ability to scan answers and short passages for key words in order to fill in the correct bubble. Further, "elementary teachers note that so many months of 'reading' the practice samples and answering multiple-choice questions on them undermines their students' ability to read sustained passages of several pages" (McNeil 2000, 731).

Yes, say proponents. Alignment of curriculum and instruction with the state assessment can be positive, if it is done well.

If the standards reflect important knowledge and skills and the tests are aligned with the standards, then what is tested should be taught. Proponents claim that this is the case in more and more states. "Some critics have contended that high-stakes tests could be harmful to children by narrowing the curriculum down to strictly what is tested. If the tests focused on low-level skills or random lists of knowledge, that might be true. But...the new kinds of tests demand a lot from students—and from teachers." (Achieve 2000, 4).

Moreover, some proponents assert that specific instruction in test-taking skills can be well worth the instructional time. They advocate instruction in test-taking skills based on the fact that these tests will be around for a long time, and children in the meantime will feel the effects (Smith 2000; Taylor and Walton 1997).

Reframing the Issues: "New" Questions

The questions outlined above just scratch the surface of the many articulate and deeply felt arguments put forth by proponents and critics of the high-stakes testing movement. On both sides, there are sincere and intelligent people who care deeply about improving public education. But as long as these questions remain the main focus of the debate, we may not be able to move to constructive solutions. There are other questions that will need to be the focus of the work in your school.

- ***How can we provide instruction that will enable students to score well on state-mandated tests without narrowing the curriculum?***

What kinds of strategies will work to raise both test scores and real student achievement? "Our first obligation is to ensure that standards-based teaching practice does not conflict with best teaching practice," says Carol Ann Tomlinson (2000, 8). An advocate of differentiated (individualized) instruction, Tomlinson sees no real contradiction between standards-based instruction and differentiated instruction. The standards tell what content children should learn—individualized instruction "can show us how to teach the same standard to a range of learners by employing a variety of teaching and learning models" (2000, 9).

- ***How can we restructure schools to help all children reach high standards?***

Although many educators are unhappy with the specific methods used to assess student achievement, all acknowledge the importance of the goal of standards-based education—to ensure that every child achieves. The insistence that all students demonstrate certain levels of knowledge and skills is forcing educators to dig deeper and find new and better ways to deal with student failure. It may eventually move us past the long-standing retention/social promotion dilemma and develop the "culture of high standards," described by Anne Wheelock (2000, 2) In such a culture, assistance is available early and often, interventions are multifaceted, and support is intensely personal, with teachers monitoring the progress of vulnerable students so that no one can fall between the cracks.

A recent overview of research titled *Helping Students Reach High Standards without Using Retention* outlines some of the approaches that can be incorporated into a schoolwide commitment to prevent student failure. They include:

- early intervention for children who are in danger of falling behind—for example, tutoring, Saturday classes, or programs such as Reading Recovery;
- extended instructional time—for example, through carefully designed summer school programs;

- professional development that ensures all teachers have a diverse repertoire of instructional strategies to engage their students in learning and are able to meet the instructional needs of even their lowest-performing students (Educational Research Service 2000).

Conclusion

Many of the issues related to high-stakes testing will not be settled any time soon. However, principals and teachers understand that they will need to move forward to provide a quality education for students in the context of whatever system is operating in their own states. These next chapters focus on helping you to do that.

Notes, Reminders, and Ideas:

Test Prep: Designing an Educationally Productive Program

For schools and principals faced with the reality of high-stakes testing, a critical question is, " Should we teach to the test?" This question leads to a host of others. For example:

- Is teaching to the test really effective in raising student test scores?
- Is test preparation ethical?
- How will our parents feel about it?

The answers to all three of these are simple—it depends on what approaches your school decides to take and how these are put into action. And remember, an even more important question underlying all these should be: What approaches can we use to help students score well—without sacrificing broader educational goals?

Consider the Nature of the Tests

First, let's put some of these issues in context. In general, we cannot consider the question of what constitutes appropriate test preparation without knowing something about the test itself. The following factors are important in considering the acceptability of "teaching to the test":

- **Assessment method** (primarily multiple-choice items vs. mixed items). If the tests include only multiple-choice items and emphasize recall of facts over higher-level thinking skills, test preparation is more likely to take time away from what most educators—and parents—would consider high-quality instruction. If, however, the tests also include open-ended items and performance-based assessment, test preparation can more easily incorporate instructional methods that promote students' higher-order thinking skills.

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- **Nature of the assessment** (norm-referenced vs. criterion-referenced). A growing number of states have developed criterion-referenced tests based on a body of knowledge that they have identified as important (Achieve, Inc. 2000). Others, however, still base high-stakes decisions about schools and students on "commercial, standardized, norm-referenced tests such as the Stanford 9" (Bracey 2000, 136).

  Norm-referenced tests are designed to rank individual students against each other and to place them along a normal curve, not to assess whether individual students have mastered specific content. Test items do not typically reflect curriculum standards that schools are responsible for teaching. Many researchers agree with Ligon that "teaching to the test is more legitimate for a criterion-referenced test than for a norm-referenced test" (2000, 8).

- **Quality of the content standards.** Even in states using criterion-referenced assessments, the quality of instruction targeted to these assessments will depend on the quality of the content standards that the state has adopted. Proponents of accountability claim that if the standards reflect important knowledge and skills and the tests are aligned with the standards, then what is tested should be taught. As Everson asserts, "teaching to the test is exactly the right thing to do as long as the test is measuring what you are supposed to learn" (Bushweller 1997, 22).

Test Preparation: What Is It? Why Provide It?

Using in-school observations and interview data from teachers and administrators, Smith describes several approaches to "preparing pupils to take mandated, high-stakes achievement tests" (1991, 521):

- teaching content known to be covered by the test, including sequencing the curriculum so that tested material is covered before test administration;
- teaching test-taking skills (for example, teaching younger students how to use answer sheets and older students how to eliminate obviously wrong answers);
- teaching to the test in both format and content;
- exhortation (for example, encouraging students to get a good night's sleep, schoolwide pep rallies, etc.);
- stress inoculation, including practice directed toward making students feel more capable of doing well on the actual test; and
- practicing on a sample test or with parallel test items.

Using these elements as indicators, virtually every school in the nation is involved with some type of test prep activities—although the specific approaches used vary greatly.

Most test preparation activities fall into two distinct, although often intertwined, areas: 1) instruction focused on content; and 2) practice in test-taking skills.

Instruction Focused on Content

This type of test preparation means that "teachers prepare their pupils for tests by reviewing the content of ordinary instruction, sequencing topics so that those the test covers would be taught prior to the test, and teaching new content that they know the test covers" (Smith 1991, 529). "Curriculum alignment" is at the heart of many state, district, and school efforts to ensure that students do well on state tests (Bushweller 1997).

However, Shepard warns that curriculum alignment can be harmful if carried too far:

> Typically, teaching to the test means devoting extended time to subject areas that are tested, such as reading and math, to the exclusion of other subjects. Test format becomes a template for how tested subjects are taught. Worksheets and practice assessments mirror the anticipated accountability tests as much as possible (2000, 7).

Practice in Test-taking Skills

A second, and often more controversial, aspect of test preparation includes efforts to familiarize students with the mechanics of testing and to teach them effective test-taking strategies. A task force of the National Council on Measurement in Education suggests that caution is needed when designing programs intended to teach students the mechanics of high-stakes tests: "It is considered appropriate to make students test-wise, but excessive amounts of instructional time should not be used to do this" (Canner 1992, 12).

Advocates of instruction in test-taking skills argue that students without these skills are at an unfair disadvantage, since their test scores do not reflect their actual knowledge and skills. As Kilian explains:

> A test score can under-represent what a student knows because the student is confused by the format, terminology, or the way in which questions are asked. For example, a certain widely used standardized test uses the term "subtract" in the computation items at the second-grade level. Students who have only been taught the words "take-away" or "minus" might miss all of these items, even though they know how to subtract (1992, 14).

Controversy over Test Preparation

Critics of the over-use of test preparation warn of the following potential problems that it can cause.

Test-Score Inflation

Particular test questions are intended only to be samples of the full curriculum. How students do on the test is supposed to show how well they have mastered that curriculum. But if students are given extensive practice on questions that imitate the test, test performance may no longer "generalize" to the intended curriculum content. In fact, controlled studies have shown that students may not be able to answer the same questions if asked even in slightly different ways (Shepard 2000).

Curriculum Distortion

Many critics of high-stakes testing point out that focusing instruction on these tests has the effect of narrowing the curriculum. In a nationwide survey for the National Science Foundation, the majority of teachers acknowledged that they had shifted instructional emphasis from non-tested to tested topics. They also reported negative effects of mandated testing on curriculum and learning. Although critics originally feared that testing would take instructional time away from "frills," such as art and citizenship, research shows that even untested core subjects such as social studies and science have been relegated to Friday afternoons or even eliminated (Shepard 2000).

Limited and Ineffective Instructional Methods

Even content areas included on the test may not be safe from the negative effects of some test preparation activities. Lynn points out that in Florida, where statewide writing assessments are in effect,

> educators acknowledge that they devote writing classes to drilling students on formulaic responses to the state test's prompts. Honing this artificial skill will not prepare students for real-world writing (2000, 48).

Texas teachers interviewed by Gordon and Reese (1997) reported that they not only oriented the content of their instruction toward information that would be tested on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS); they also "taught to the TAAS format." Each of them included activities such as TAAS warm-ups, TAAS mini-drills, and TAAS preparations on a routine basis.

What Is "Good" Test Preparation?

Despite reactions against extensive "test prep," education leaders know that it would be irresponsible not to help students prepare to perform their best on high-stakes tests. David Gray, a former elementary school principal, is clear: "Principals and teachers must find ways to integrate improved instruction into preparation for standardized testing" (1999, 47). The question is, what kinds and amounts of test preparation are instructionally beneficial for students? Most researchers, as well as practitioners, view test preparation as a continuum. In Linn's view:

> Practices range from quite acceptable to quite unacceptable. For example, the focusing of instruction on the general concepts and skills included in the test may be in keeping with the belief that the test corresponds to instructionally important objectives and may be considered acceptable, even desirable, practice. On the other hand, the narrow teaching of the specific content sampled by the test, or coaching in specific responses to test items would be widely condemned as unacceptable practice (2000, 7).

The following are test preparation activities that are commonly endorsed in the research:

- Establish the importance of the test, perhaps through processes that enable teachers to make better use of class and individual results to diagnose needs and plan future instruction (Powell 1999).

- Align curriculum content with test content, provided that the assessment is based on solid, thoughtful standards.

- Teach test-wiseness skills. Michael and Edwards (1991) surveyed elementary, middle, and high school counselors regarding instruction in test-taking skills. Four components were deemed essential by all three groups: following directions, reading questions carefully, understanding test language or vocabulary, and using time effectively.

- Provide test "preparation" within the curriculum throughout the year instead of as intensive "cram sessions" beginning a few weeks before the test (Miyasaka 2000).

- Provide opportunities for practice in a standardized test environment. For example, give some tests under time constraints and provide directions only once. Score these practice tests for use in analyzing student strengths and weaknesses, and provide time for students to review problem items (Powell 1999).

Clovis suggests that helping students practice time management can also help to make the actual testing situation less stressful: "Throughout the year, give a few tests with time limits, so that when faced with a timed test, children don't panic" (1999, 28).

- Make sure that test-preparation practices help students understand the importance of doing their best on the test without feeling inappropriately pressured (Miyasaka 2000).

Good Test Prep = Good Instruction

Ultimately, "good" test preparation cannot be separated from "good" instruction. For example, Duke and Ritchhart provide some strategies that "make explicit connections between good test-taking practices and good general-learning practices" in mathematics:

+ Make word problems a priority; this will help students apply existing skills in new contexts.
+ Stress number sense, since without it, students make errors because they have a hard time judging whether their answers are reasonable.
+ Focus on estimation, a "real-life skill that pays off when it comes to tests."
+ Emphasize mental math by "tapping into students' natural way of doing mathematics...which may not always match how we teach....Have students share their strategies with classmates; but, remember, what works well for one student may not work for another" (1997, 91-92, 119).

Their suggestion is that teachers look for these connections and embed the practices in their every-day instruction.

Source: Nell K. Duke and Ron Ritchart. 1997. ""Standardized Test Preparation." Instructor (October 1997): 89-92, 199.

Examples of Productive Approaches to Test Preparation

Mesa Unified School District 4, Arizona

Mesa Unified School District 4 has developed training and materials on test preparation for their principals and teachers. As part of the training, good test preparation is described as:

- improving students' ability to show what they know;
- an ongoing activity;
- part of instruction;
- integrated into many subjects;
- providing students with general test taking strategies; and
- providing students with experience in a variety of item formats/layouts and types.

Just as important, good test preparation is not:

- improving students' ability to "show" without having "the know";
- another onerous task added on top of what teachers already do;
- cramming in test preparation activities just before the test;
- practicing with questions that are the same as or very similar to actual test questions; or
- applicable to only one test.

In materials developed by the district, "accurate test scores" are presented as a goal. Three components contribute to reaching this goal:

Accurate Test Scores = Content Knowledge + Familiarity + Motivation

The figure on page 18 shows how these three components are integrated with instruction, rather than presented solely as add-on test practice sessions. For example, students are provided with opportunities to review their past performance on tests so that they can identify content they need to learn and also recognize counterproductive test-taking strategies (O'Reilly undated).

Test preparation in the district is not an isolated activity designed to boost scores on a particular test or set of tests. Instead, it is an ongoing part of instructional practice designed to raise actual student achievement and to ensure that what students

know is accurately reflected on tests. At the beginning of each year, central-office staff meet with principals of all schools. Each principal is given a data book that presents the school's achievement indicators from the previous year (Stanford 9 scores, district test results, AIMS results, etc.). The data are organized and analyzed to enable the school staff to answer the following questions:

- Are our overall scores acceptable?
- How did students do on specific objectives?
- How did different sub-populations score? (analyzed by ethnicity, mobility, poverty, and language-minority status)
- How have scores changed over time?

Central-office staff can provide the data, but it's up to the school principal and staff to develop hypotheses about the reasons for strengths and weaknesses revealed by the data. In this sense, they are asked to be "educational detectives." As Joe O'Reilly, Director of Assessments and Special Projects, says, "we don't say, 'You must raise your test scores.' Instead, we're saying, 'Look at the patterns, see what areas you can improve, and develop improvement strategies."

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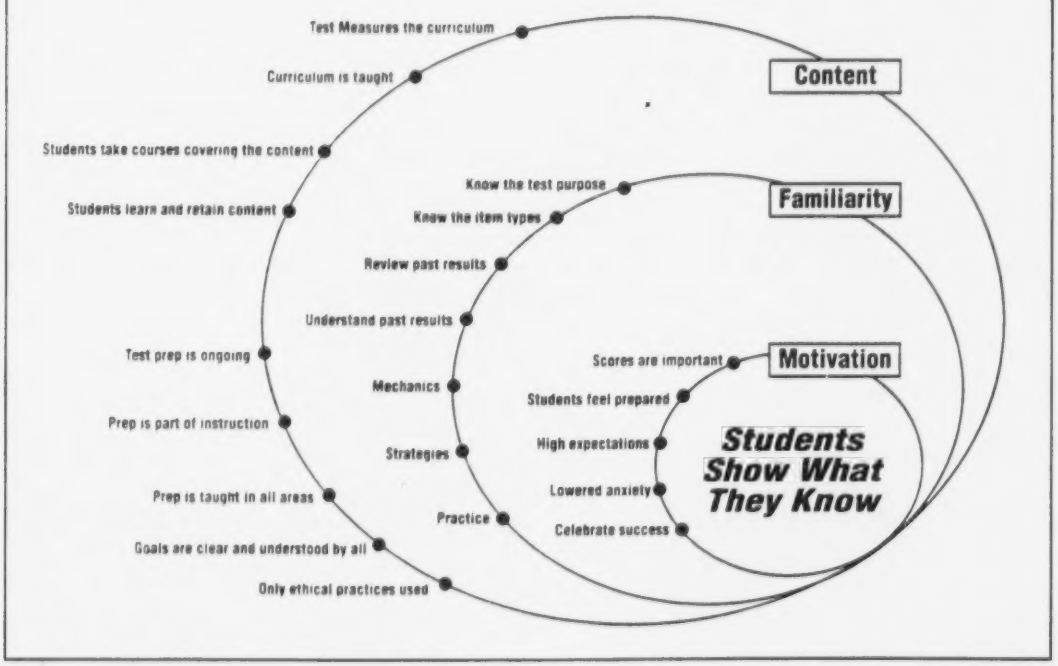
Mesa School District: IntegratingTest Preparation Into Instruction to Produce Accurate Test Scores



While motivating students to take the tests seriously has sometimes been a struggle, teachers and principals try to emphasize to students that the assessments are a way to show what they have learned, and therefore should receive their best efforts.

Mamaroneck Avenue Elementary School, New York

Berendt and Koski describe the approach taken at their suburban New York elementary school to raise scores on the third-grade reading test. Three goals were established: to familiarize students with the test format, to develop their reading skills, and to "reduce test anxiety without compromising the integrity of the exam" (1999, 46). An underlying principle was ensuring that the test preparation did not encroach on time available for content-area instruction.

Data from a practice test plus teacher knowledge were used to group children into twice-weekly, small-group, 30-minute practice sessions (once a week for children who scored above a certain score). While one of these sessions was used for literature enrichment, the other was used for direct teaching of the reading strategies students needed to know to perform well on the state test. Teachers used the practice exercises to model strategies such as pronoun referents and semantic clues—strategies that would also help students become more independent readers. Two more practice tests were administered, with information about results shared with parents and students. In addition, practice sheets were sent home with students, and parents were instructed in their use.

"Dramatic" improvements (95 percent scoring above the state referent point, up from 77 percent two years earlier) were attributed to the following:

- focused reading instruction emphasized specific strategies (both reading-related and approaches to successfully taking tests);
- children worked in small groups with a professional;
- all students followed a consistent, predictable schedule;
- teachers were involved in preparation of materials;
- students and parents received regular feedback; and
- parents were involved with preparing their children (Berendt and Koski 1999, 47).

Chicago Public Schools

Carole Perlman describes the approach developed by the Chicago Public Schools as "surreptitious inclusion of good teaching in test preparation activities." (2000, 12). Teacher workshops and support materials created by the district staff place

the emphasis on teaching and assessing critical thinking skills, in the belief that students who can think and problem-solve will do well on standardized tests. They also stress the need to integrate "test prep" activities with regular instruction, so that test preparation does not become a time-consuming add-on. For example, in relation to teaching reading, teachers are encouraged to:

- assist students in developing strategies to use if they're having trouble understanding something they're reading;
- ask students to retell stories in their own words, communicating the main idea, identifying sequence, and providing details;
- have the students read a wide variety of materials; and
- incorporate reading and writing activities in all subject areas.

Teachers are also encouraged to make a connection between classroom assessment—tests, homework, and oral questions—and standardized tests. Templates are provided to help teachers learn how to develop better questions of their own, ones that focus on problem solving or thinking skills instead of merely recall of facts. For example,

- Recall : What is _____?
- Analysis: How does _____ work?
- Comparison: Compare _____ to _____.
- Inference: What do you think would happen if _____?
- Evaluation: In your opinion, what is the best solution to the problem of _____? Why is it the best?

In Perlman's words:

> The message we were trying to send was that standardized tests require students to apply critical thinking skills and if students become accustomed to answering those types of questions on a regular basis in class, they are likely to do better on the tests. We also pointed out that those questions are also likely to make classes more interesting and fun. We tried to convince teachers that: (1) it's important to ask the kids something other than recall questions, and (2) a question doesn't have to be multiple choice to be good test preparation, so it's not only okay, but desirable, to ask open-ended questions that require students to apply critical thinking skills.
>
> We often hear that use of standardized testing promotes memorization and rote learning, but this has always been puzzling to me, because I can't

imagine how memorizing anything would help a student do better on a standardized reading test. Certainly our aim was to get teachers out of the habit of asking mostly recall questions (2000, 17).

The Chicago Public Schools approach to test prep includes three additional elements:

- instruction on test-taking skills (for example, students should be taught to follow directions carefully; students need to practice using the answer sheets);
- attention to student attitudes and motivation (for example, teachers should expect good results and model positive attitudes; teachers should anticipate and deal with test anxiety); and
- additional suggestions for teachers in how to integrate activities with regular instruction (for example, assist students in developing strategies to use if they are having trouble understanding something they're reading).

Perlman reports that, as a result of the carefully thought-out and coordinated effort, teachers have "bought into the idea that good teaching is good test preparation" (2000, 20).

Ascarate Elementary School, Texas

Hoyos reports on the instructional strategies used in her school that help the students do well on the state-mandated tests and become more effective learners. In math, for example, students are given a brief daily quiz that includes concepts and skills that they have learned to date—not just those presented in the past few days. They compose their own problems and then solve and discuss these as a group. They generate graphs, charts, and schedules that show, for example, the number of hours slept each day for a month. One of the reading strategies focuses on helping students recognize and articulate the reading strategies they use—such as making predictions, setting purposes for reading, etc.—so that they will be able to "call on them successfully in a high-pressure testing situation" (1996, 61).

Harrison Elementary School, Idaho

In the fall of 1995, student mathematics achievement levels on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) were below average at the third-, fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade levels. Under the leadership of the principal, the staff decided that two problems should be addressed: student lack of proficiency with basic arithmetic skills and student unfamiliarity with standardized test-taking procedures.

The 50-in-a-Minute component of what is now called the Standardized Timed Curriculum is a series of criterion-referenced exercises used to teach mastery of basic number facts along with practice in attempting to answer 50 number-fact problems on a single sheet of paper in one minute. The component has sequences of computation learning objectives for each child to achieve at each grade level, e.g., first grade, addition to 10, subtraction from 10.

Each grade level (K-6) has about five to eight basic math-fact learning objectives that all students are expected to master by the end of each school year. The learning objectives overlap from grade to grade for purpose of review, and increase in difficulty with each successive grade. For example, one objective in the fifth grade is for students to answer 50 problems involving fractions in one minute. In the sixth grade, the objectives are to answer 50 problems involving fractions in one minute, and also to answer 50 problems involving fraction equivalents in one minute.

When a student demonstrates that he or she has achieved a specific learning objective, that is called "passing-off" the objective. For example, in secondnd grade, three of the learning objectives are addition to 18, subtraction to 18, and multiplication 0-5. When a student has demonstrated that he or she has successfully completed in one minute an exercise worksheet of 50 problems involving sums to 18, he or she has "passed-off" that learning objective. The student then proceeds to work on "passing-off" subtraction-to-18 and then to "passing-off" multiplication 0-5.

In addition to practice for students, the process provides teachers with ways to monitor both individual and class progress toward specific learning objectives and to adjust instruction accordingly. In the first year, after only six weeks of such practice testing before the October testing in 1995, the percentage of correct answers (and thus the percentile scores) on the ITBS increased significantly at all four grade levels.

As the Harrison faculty saw their efforts paying off in high mathematics achievement, a similar set of practice tests for reading and language was developed in such areas as comprehension, vocabulary, capitalization and punctuation. The program has been continually refined and is now used in other schools in the district (Smith 2000).

Baltimore County Elementary Schools, Maryland

Bushweller describes what he saw in a Baltimore County, Maryland, school that was one of the eight elementary schools in the state to increase scores for three consecutive years:

> Pinned up somewhere in every classroom are two daily reminders. One emphasizes what students should know after the day's lesson, and the other says what they should be able to do with that knowledge. That

> double-edge "know and do" emphasis is the foundation of the school's experiential learning program, which emphasizes teaching lessons that apply to real life—and that are almost always linked in some way to skills tested by the state....[Teachers in the school] also believe that learning how to take tests is a valuable skill in the real world. So they teach their kids how to outsmart tests by honing their test-taking skills....To sharpen these skills, they take practice tests developed by the teachers. Because the Maryland test has essay-type questions with multistep directions (as well as short-answer questions), the students are taught to circle "do" words in the directions and to check them off after they accomplish what the question asked them to do (1997, 22).

As in other schools in which test prep has been successful, both content and test-taking strategies were included in this successful approach.

Problem-Based Learning in Illinois

Ewy reports on a problem-based learning project conducted by some Illinois sixth graders that ultimately helped them to improve their scores on a state-mandated test. With help from their teacher, they decided to used problem-based learning to improve their scores in a way that would "keep scores improving each year, set a good example for the school, and make preparing for the IGAP more fun" (1996/1997, 76).

Students identified their ideas (such as "pay attention in class"), facts they already knew (such as "you get better when you practice"), their questions (such as "how long is the test?" and "how is the test scored?"), and their action plan ("look for resources to practice" and "work with the teacher to set up a schedule"). With the support of school staff, they put their action plan into practice. In addition to learning skills helpful to them when taking the standardized test, the students reported that they "liked having some power while at school" (77).

Review Your School's Needs

Test preparation is a complex and controversial issue. Decisions about the kinds and amounts of test preparation to provide are affected by the content and format of the specific tests and by the ways in which the scores will be used. In addition, there is often a disagreement about the definition of test preparation and its potential benefits and disadvantages. And test preparation practices vary greatly in terms of content, approach, and quality. It can be either educationally productive or a frustrating waste of precious time.

Taking Tests: Tips for Students

Here are some strategies that will help you become a better multiple-choice test taker. Keep these ideas in your notebook and review them before your tests.

Remember: Tests are supposed to let you and your teacher know what you have learned and what you still need to work on. Do your part by paying attention in class, completing all assignments, asking questions when you do not understand, and reviewing before the test. Do your best, and don't waste your energy or your time worrying.

As you begin the test, take time to think about the "big picture." Remind yourself of what the test is all about.

- ✓ Read the questions carefully. Ask yourself, "What is this question trying to find out?"
- ✓ If there is a vocabulary word in the question that you do not know, try to figure it out by reading the rest of the question and the answer choices.
- ✓ Try to figure out each answer before you look at the multiple choices. Next, see if your answer matches. If it does not match, reread the question and check your work.
- ✓ If you do not know which answer choice is correct, eliminate the ones you believe are wrong. Then work backwards to see which of the answer choices that are left work best to answer the question.
- ✓ If you have no idea what the answer should be or how to figure it out, skip the question. You can come back to it when you have finished the questions that you do know.
- ✓ Use time wisely. Don't daydream or spend too long stuck on one question.

Best Strategy: Be prepared!

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 1998.

Successful development of these effective test preparation strategies requires a careful review of the needs of students in *your* school. McColskey and McMunn go to the bottom line for principals:

> Ultimately, it is up to school leaders to encourage teachers to discuss the pros and cons of specific test preparation strategies and to develop a reasonable set of educationally defensible strategies with a positive impact on students (2000, 117).

To help you and your teachers begin the discussions needed to either establish a "new" test prep program or to evaluate your current one, Powell provides some specific guidelines for test prep that does not "cross ethical bounds nor cause the process to dominate classroom instruction." Her suggestions for an effective test preparation program include:

- Establish the importance of the test, perhaps by increasing the use of information provided about the skills mastered by classes and individual children to teachers for their use in evaluating and planning instruction.
- Gather all available information about the content and format of the test.
- Align the objectives of the test with the curriculum.
- Develop a comprehensive list of test-wiseness skills through use of printed manuals, discussions among teachers, etc.—then teach them.
- Infuse the curriculum with both content and format that will be included on the test.
- Provide opportunities for practice in a standardized test environment. For example, give the test under time constraints and provide directions only once. Score these practice tests for use in analyzing student strengths and weaknesses and provide time for students to review problem items (1999, 35).

Notes, Reminders, and Ideas

Preparing Teachers for Testing

Ensuring that your students do well on high-stakes tests must first begin with preparing teachers. The Mesa, Arizona, approach stressed the importance of staff familiarity with the test, something that many schools learned the hard way as they began working with "new" state-mandated tests. Keep in mind that, even if your state testing system has been in place for a few years, first-year teachers or even experienced teachers who are new to your state will need information about the test. Key elements of this information include:

- **Knowing the purpose and design of the tests.** For example, teachers must be aware that the norm-referenced Stanford 9 is designed to tell how students compare to other students nationally, and students are not expected to get all items correct; in contrast, Arizona's state AIMS test is a criterion-referenced test to determine how well students have mastered state academic standards, and all students could potentially get all items correct.

- **Knowing item formats.** Teachers should be aware of the types of questions that appear on the tests (for example, multiple-choice, short answer, essay, performance activity) and the kinds of instruction that would prepare students for each type of question.

- **Knowing how well students have done in the past on the tests, and why.** This includes reviewing results, looking at patterns across tests and years, and developing hypotheses as to why students scored as they did (O'Reilly undated).

Some schools have found it helpful to provide their teachers with suggestions of ways to incorporate test preparation in their regular instruction. For example:

- Incorporate test item formats into quizzes, tests, and assignments you already do.

- Prepare review activities on test-taking strategies (daily warm-ups, games, etc.).
- Use timed activities to prepare students for taking timed tests.
- Advertise the test date early so parents can schedule appointments around it.
- Share test-taking ideas with other teachers.
- Read scripted directions ahead of time to make sure you can effectively communicate them to your students.
- Provide difficult, extra-credit questions on quizzes to provide students with guessing practice.
- Help students see testing as a logical extension of the learning process.
- Present a caring, friendly, but no-nonsense attitude to the students. Let them know you're convinced they will do well.
- Let them know the test is important.
- Make regular testing fun and positive in your classroom (Mesa Unified School District 4, 1998)..

Consistent with its efforts to have teachers provide instruction focused on critical thinking skills, Chicago Public Schools has developed a related list of suggested activities. For example, teachers are encouraged to: "Discuss why the right answer is right. Ask what in the text or from class supports or points us toward the correct answer. It is also important to discuss why the wrong answers are wrong."

Teachers are also encouraged to review and discuss practice items with students, paying careful attention to both content and test structure that seem to confuse students:

> When you give practice items, always discuss the items in detail with the students. This can also be done after the students take multiple-choice tests as part of their classroom work. Explain each answer and how one would arrive at it. What is the evidence that leads us to believe the answer is correct? It is *equally* important to explain why each of the incorrect answer choices is wrong. Discussing alternatives might also be done as a small group activity. It is a good idea to have students explain why each

General Tips for Classroom, Homework, and Assessment Activities

Summarized below are some general tips teachers can use to help students perform well on tests. These tips expand on the test-taking and motivational strategies, while continuing the emphasis on fostering students' critical thinking skills. You have probably tried many of the suggested strategies and can recommend additional ones. We hope you will find some new ones here that will be useful in your classroom.

- ✓ If you use practice tests, make them a learning experience. Discuss why the right answer is right. Ask what in the text or from class supports or points us toward the correct answer. It is also important to discuss why the wrong answers are wrong.
- ✓ Teach students the different categories of thinking skills: recall, analysis, comparison, inference, and evaluation. Encourage students to develop and classify activities and questions by the cognitive operations required.
- ✓ Ask open-ended questions that do not assume one right answer.
- ✓ Encourage students to explain their thinking, i.e., how they arrived at their answer, conclusion, or opinion.
- ✓ Apply information from the text to new and different situations or issues.
- ✓ Encourage application of information by asking students to relate it to their own experiences.
- ✓ Practice distinguishing fact from opinion and relevant from irrelevant information.
- ✓ Incorporate all levels of cognitive operations into daily activities, assignments, class discussion, homework, and tests.
- ✓ Use performance assessments to examine students' depth of understanding of a topic.
- ✓ Have students develop questions for classroom discussions and practice tests.
- ✓ Use TAP, IGAP Goal Area Scores, and Stanford Diagnostic results to plan curriculum and instruction for students.
- ✓ Discuss in small groups why answers are right or wrong, complete or incomplete, good or better.
- ✓ Use brainstorming and other strategies that promote a diversity of responses.
- ✓ Practice looking for relationships among ideas by identifying common threads.
- ✓ Occasionally engage students in solving verbal analogies, logic puzzles, and other classification problems.
- ✓ Have students evaluate their own or others' solutions or work.
- ✓ Occasionally assign time limits to classroom work and structure assignments, quizzes, or tests in formats similar to those found on the standardized assessments used in the district.

Borger, et al. 1996a. *Preparing Your Elementary School Students to Take Standardized Tests.*

> right answer was right and explain why each of the other alternatives was incorrect. Discussion of all the choices can help students adopt better strategies as they see why one answer was better than the others.
>
> Through practice, teachers can ensure that the test-item formats are familiar to the students. If some formats seem confusing to the students, provide sufficient practice through sample items on classroom assessments. Also, make sure that the students are familiar with key words and concepts that appear in testing situations (e.g., select the best answer) and understand what the format of the item is requesting (Borger et al. 1996a).

The role that the principal plays in supporting teachers in the high-stakes environment is also key to a school's success. A survey of Virginia teachers designed to measure the effects of high-stakes testing on instructional best practice (such as making connections to prior learning, checking for understanding, and providing prompt feedback with guided and independent practice) provides valuable information for principals.

In essence, in schools in which instructional best practice existed, teachers were "encouraged to teach to each student's learning needs" (Kaplan and Owings 2001, 18) and were also most likely to show strong support for high-stakes testing. The researchers, who describe teachers as the "catalysts essential to any accountability program's success" (22), explain the implications for principals:

> As instructional leaders, principals who regularly emphasize, articulate, and reinforce teaching behaviors that research identifies as instructional best practices can increase their teachers' confidence in high-stakes testing. Principals and assistant principals who regularly observe teachers, confer with them about instructional practices and student learning, and encourage teachers to teach to each student's learning needs can increase learning in every classroom. Similarly, principals and assistant principals who provide ongoing professional development in varied formats to assist novice and marginal teachers learn and practice these effective pedagogical strategies can also increase the prevalence of these behaviors in their schools. Teachers' confidence in their own professional abilities will allow them to expect their students to learn well and to successfully meet higher assessed standards (18).

In a study of "beat-the-odds" teachers and schools (those that were demonstrating success with helping their students meet high standards) other researchers found that there were important characteristics that distinguished high-performing schools from those that were doing less well. For example,

> In schools that beat the odds, test preparation has been integrated into the class time, as part of [ongoing instruction]. In contrast, in the more typically performing schools, test prep is allocated to its own space in class time, often before testing begins, apart from the rest of the year's work and goals.
>
> What does this mean?—In higher performing schools, the knowledge and skills for performing well on high stakes tests are made overt to both teachers and students. Teachers, principals and district-level coordinators often create working groups of professionals who collaboratively study the demands of the high stakes tests their students will take. They even take the tests themselves to identify the skills and knowledge required to do well. They discuss how these demands relate to district and state standards and expectations as well as to their curriculum, and then they discuss ways to integrate these skills into the curriculum. This reflection helps teachers understand the demands of the test, consider how these demands relate to their current practice, and plan ways to integrate the necessary skills and knowledge into the curriculum, across grades and school years. This process helps them move the focus of test preparation from practice on the surface features of the test itself to the knowledge that underlies successful learning and achievement in literacy and English.... In more typically performing schools, teachers rely on more traditional approaches to test preparation. If preparation is done at all, it is inserted as a separate activity rather than integrated into the ongoing curriculum. The focus tends to be on how to take the test rather than on the underlying knowledge and skills necessary for success. Teachers give students old editions of the test, make their own practice tests using activities that mirror the test-at-hand, and sometimes use commercial materials with similar formats and questions. Preparation is often done one or two weeks (or more) before the exam, or the preparation is sporadic and unconnected across long periods of time. Students often do not understand the purpose of the test, nor what they can do to improve their performance (Langer et al. 2000, 6).

The principals in these schools provide support for the teachers, ensure time to collaborate, and are actively involved in discussions about standards and how the teachers can work toward helping their students achieve them. Researchers observed some specific activities, which they characterized as "activities that work," that principals and teachers do together, sometimes with the support of central office personnel. They:

- analyze the demands of a test;
- identify connections to the standards and goals;
- design and align curriculum to meet the demands of the test;

- develop instructional strategies that enable students to build necessary skills;
- ensure that skills are learned across the year and across grades;
- make overt connections between and among instructional strategies, tests, and current learning; and
- develop and implement model lessons that integrate test preparation into the curriculum (Langer et al. 2000, 7).

Another study of high-poverty schools that had experienced significant improvements in student achievement found that "substantially improved schools" were very different in several ways. Most important, they had principals who were considered by teachers to be instructional leaders. Some specific characteristics related to principal leadership were observed:

> To help staff improve, principals in Profile Schools not only developed workshops, but also provided regular coaching and assistance in the classroom, to help teachers improve their educational practices. These effective principals are very strong on follow through, making sure plans become reality. For example, Oriole Park's principal reviews information about student performance weekly with teachers....Staff work as a cohesive team. They share the same priorities. They communicate often about instructional issues and about students. They trust each other and trust the principal (Moore et al. 1998).

The lesson for principals is that they can best prepare teachers for high-stakes testing by simply supporting high-quality instructional practices. Teachers are helped to learn new strategies, to work together collaboratively to build a strong program, and to embed test preparation in regular instruction.

Notes, Reminders, and Ideas

Test Day: Helping Students Do Their Best

Often, the focus of school leaders and staff on test day is on the details of test administration. These details—test security, ensuring that all students are provided with accurate instructions, etc.—*are* important. Just as important, however, is attention to ways to make testing less stressful, and thus more productive. Wongbundhit reminds us not to ignore these other issues:

> Ideally, if high-stakes test scores always accurately reflected students' mastery of important skills and abilities, schools that improved their instructional programs to raise student achievement would automatically improve their test results as well. In the real world, however, many other factors besides student achievement can affect how well a school's students perform on high-stakes tests. While raising student achievement must be the main focus, schools would also be wise to create the optimal conditions to help their students perform well in the test-taking situation (Wongbundhit 1996, 3)

Calkins, Montgomery, and Santman, in discussing what they describe as "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day," make some recommendations to teachers for how they can make the actual test administration less stressful to students. First they describe what they, as teachers, had typically done in a misguided effort to help students by establishing "standard" conditions on test-taking day:

> I'd rearrange the desks, separating each into an island. I knew absolutely, unambivalently that my students needed to bring three No. 2 pencils to school on Test Day...Absolutely and unambivalently I assigned the seats, and absolutely and unambivalently I delivered the Test-Taking Address. "Today, you will respect each other's personal space. Our eyes will not wander. Hands on the desk, eyes on the page. There will be no talking and no touching" (1995, 123).

Making the most of a "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day"

Tense students won't do as well, so...

Soft-pedal the high-stakes nature to the students while still trying to keep motivation high

Keep the environment comfortable, familiar, and as routine as possible:

- Seating, room arrangement
- Bells, announcements

Think about the intangibles:

- Staff attitudes
- Nutritional aspects
- Materials (pencils, scrap paper)
- Warm-up time and reminders about effective test-taking strategies

However, after talking with other teachers, the authors found that each teacher's notion of what constituted standard conditions was different. While all the teachers agreed that rules for test administration should be followed, many of the teachers focused on providing emotional supports for the students that made the testing situation less stressful. For example, one teacher worked with her children before test day to develop a seating arrangement that would be comfortable and efficient for each individual student, while still ensuring that there was ample space between students. Another teacher brought snacks for the students to eat between portions of the test. Another made a special effort to be as "serene and loving as possible" on the day of the test. Other teachers discovered that:

> After carefully reading the regulation books for their own tests... it was within the rules to talk to the children as long as they weren't feeding them any answers. These teachers were free to remind kids, "Use the strategies we talked about in class"...They were never telling the students answers, never telling them even particular strategies to use, they were only reminding them, in a general way, to do what they already knew they could do (1998, 134).

This attention to the context of the situation should ideally begin before the tests. Miyasaka suggests that test preparation activities can help students to understand the importance of the tests—but that the students should not be made to feel inappropriately pressured (2000). Duke and Ritchhart (1997) include this suggestion as one of their tips for "nipping test stress in the bud": "Promote positive attitudes about testing—when discussing tests with students, make three recommendations: Be serious, confident, and strategic."

Beal (1997) describes a middle school's efforts to increase CTBS scores that did *not* include formal test prep activities but still resulted in higher scores for all grades over a one-year period. In essence, the staff focused on raising motivation to do well by including student input in setting goals for improvement and in selecting a reward for class-based goal achievement (a social/dance). Parents and businesses also demonstrated their support for the students by providing snack food for testing day, another activity that differentiated the day in a positive way.

The Chicago Public Schools' effort to develop a comprehensive program for preparing students to take high-stakes tests includes attention to dealing with test anxiety and stress. Some of their suggestions deal with the "getting ready" time, for example, "Make a special effort to prepare students with low expectations because of previous academic problems. Entering the testing with a sense of success promotes good test performance." Other suggestions are intended for use during testing—for example, teachers are reminded to look for signs of stress such as headaches or stomach aches (Borger et al. 1996a, 1996b).

Berendt and Koski (1999) describe the approach taken in their suburban New York elementary school to decrease the stress that children experienced on test-taking day. Children took tests in smaller, homogeneous groups so that they were less likely to feel pressure if other students finished early. However, this idea should be balanced against another important concept—that of allowing students to take the tests in a familiar setting, with a familiar teacher.

Velasco Elementary School (Texas) has developed a way to help students both develop test-taking strategies and take the high-stakes TAAS in familiar conditions. Poster board "cubbies" are placed on each child's desk whenever the children take periodic diagnostic assessments. During these assessments, the side facing the students includes grade-appropriate test-taking strategies. For example, test-taking strategies included on the math section of the cubby are:

- Read the problem.
- Underline the question.
- Make sure you understand what the question is asking.

Anticipate and deal with test anxiety.

Getting ready to take a test involves preparing students emotionally as well as academically. Test anxiety is an unpleasant feeling experienced as a result of an impending test or other evaluative situation. Although some apprehension about an upcoming test is common, a high level of test anxiety can interfere with effective and successful task performance. Some suggestions for minimizing test anxiety and preparing students to do their best when being tested follow.

- ✓ Help students prepare ahead of time, over a period of weeks and months. Inform your students about the test and let them know when testing will take place. Knowing what to expect increases student confidence. When you are teaching a concept or skill that will be measured on the test, familiarize your students with the types of questions they will encounter.
- ✓ Help students develop positive self-concepts as learners. Offer positive statements to students about their capabilities and work. Make a special effort to prepare students with low expectations because of previous academic problems. Entering the testing with a sense of success promotes good test performance.
- ✓ Help students learn to recognize when they are under stress and how to deal with stress. The physiological signs include headaches, upset stomach, muscle cramps, cold hands, and sweating. Behavioral signs include acting out and avoidance. There are also cognitive signs, such as an inability to remember something he or she has studied. Point out that nearly everyone experiences some anxiety concerning test taking. Note that a low level of anxiety in testing situations can be beneficial to test performance because it makes one alert.
- ✓ Tell students about stress management techniques that can be helpful just before and during a test. Encourage students to:
  - □ try to think positively and focus on what they can do;
  - □ observe and focus on the rhythm of their breathing (simply being aware of breathing in and out can help reduce tension);
  - □ inhale slowly and deeply, hold their breath for a count of two, and then exhale slowly;
  - □ relax their muscles by clenching their muscles tightly, holding for a few seconds and then slowly letting go, allowing their muscles to go limp; and
  - □ combine the two previous steps: inhale slowly and deeply while clenching muscles, hold their breath for a count of two, and then exhale slowly, while relaxing their muscles.
- ✓ If they are taking more than one test at a sitting, give students the opportunity to relax between tests. The relaxation activities listed above might be helpful during breaks. Having the students shrug their shoulders or stretch might also help reduce tension.

Source: Borger et al. 1996a. *Preparing Your Elementary Students to Take Standardized Tests.*

- Study charts and graphs.
- Read the problem again. Underline the numbers and circle the labels.
- Decide if you add or subtract.
- Work the problem. Show your work
- Is your answer reasonable? Is it one of the choices?
- X out the wrong answers.
- Bubble in the correct answer.

When the children take the actual test, the cubby is simply turned to the other blank side. Other strategies focus on reading; capitalization and punctuation tools are also included on the cubbies.

Wongbundhit (1996) reports on the effects of the Dade County Public Schools (Florida) decision to administer the required high school competency exam on two consecutive Saturdays rather than on two consecutive school days. This plan allowed the schools to use classrooms with adequate lighting, ventilation, a comfortable seat, and flat writing surface instead of large-group settings such as the cafeteria or auditorium, many of which did not have all these features. The plan also eliminated the distractions of bells and other noise present in a typical school day. Transportation was provided for students normally transported to school, and students received breakfast and lunch at no cost. In comparing the 1993 results to those of the previous year, the district found that participation rates did not change and that scores increased for both the communications and mathematics portions of the test with the greatest improvements demonstrated by Black and Hispanic students.

Kennedy Elementary School (Mercedes, Texas) helped its fourth graders to prepare for the writing portion of the TAAS, using technology to make the experience both productive and less stressful than many typical review sessions. Each teacher was assigned a section of the curriculum required by the state standards and asked to design a project-based lesson that incorporated technology. On "Power TAAS! Day," students cycled through learning exercises that used computer programs and the Internet to review what they had been learning.

Principal Barbara Hinojosa reports that the use of technology defused anxiety, with students eager to participate. Since the students were in small groups, teachers were able to identify and offer extra, targeted assistance to students who needed it. After the day-long event, students commented that the experiences had helped them to see how much they already knew and better prepared them to take the test (NetDay Compass Newsletter 2001).

Realizing that a calm, structured environment will help many students to do their best, the Mesa Public School District provides these suggestions for teachers to use during test administration:

- Monitor progress consistently during the test without unnecessarily disturbing the students.
- Eliminate distractions during the test (shuffling papers, sharpening pencils, etc.).
- Make sure students know what resources they can or cannot access (teacher, dictionary, etc.).
- Use breaks for energizing activities like stretching, listening to music, or jogging in place.
- Make sure students know what to do if they finish early (Mesa Public Schools 1996, iii).

These brief suggestions and descriptions are included to jump-start discussion in your school. Too often, principals and teachers feel so pressured by the need to help students master the content and mechanics that will help them to do well on the test that the emotional aspects are overlooked. However, every teacher has had experiences with students who don't do as well when they are worried or stressed. Taking the time to talk about and implement ways that students can be supported on test day can pay off in higher scores.

Notes, Reminders, and Ideas

Accommodations and Alternative Assessments for Students with Special Needs

Under current federal law, English-language learners and special education students must be included in state and local testing programs. In addition:

- Accommodations and alternative assessments may be used.
- Results must be disaggregated so that the progress of these groups of students can be measured.
- Regulations vary as to whether or how the results will be included in school and district results for accountability purposes (Individuals with Disabilities Act 1997; Improving America's Schools Act 1994).

Because many parents as well as school personnel had questions about specific aspects of the federal law, a "family friendly" document in a question and answer format was developed by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services of the U.S. Department of Education. It has been reproduced on pages 49-51, formatted so that you can easily reproduce it for use with teachers and parents.

Purpose of Accommodations

The use of accommodations should not be considered a way to simply make the assessment "easier" for students with special needs. Instead, their use—and which ones are used—should:

ensure that scores reflect levels of knowledge rather than the effect of the disability. By law, students with disabilities are entitled to such accommodations...[However], experts caution that accommodations for students with special needs should not interfere with obtaining a true measure of students' performance.

Source: McREL. 2000. Noteworthy Perspectives on Implementing Standards-Based Education.

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Accommodations and Alternative Assessments

Accommodation—A change in how a test is presented, in how a test is administered, orin how the test taker is allowed to respond. This term generally refers to changes that do not substantially alter what the test measures. The proper use of accommodations does not substantially change academic level or performance criteria. Appropriate accommodations are made in order to level the playing field, i.e., to provide equal opportunity to demonstrate knowledge.

Alternate assessment—An assessment designed for those students with disabilities who are unable to participate in general large-scale assessments used by a school district or state, even when accommodations or modifications are provided. The alternate assessment provides a mechanism for students with even the most significant disabilities to be included in the assessment system.

Source: *The Use of Tests as Part of High-Stakes Decision-Making for Students: A Resource Guide for Educators and Policy-makers.* 2000. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. Online: www.ed.gov/offices/OCR/testing/TestingResource.pdf.

An appropriate accommodation might be reading a math test to a student with reading difficulties; it would not include reading a reading test.

A *Resource Guide* developed by the Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. Office of Education provides guidance about the general types of accommodations that could be offered, and addresses the two primary questions that should be asked when making decisions about accommodations:

> Typically, accommodations to established conditions are found in three main phases of testing: 1) the administration of tests, 2) how students are allowed to respond to the items, and 3) the presentation of the tests (how the items are presented to the students on the test instrument). Administration accommodations involve setting and timing, and can include extended time to counteract the increased literacy demands for English language learners or fatigue for a student with sensory disabilities. Response accommodations allow students to demonstrate what they know in different ways, such as responding on a computer rather than in a test booklet. Presentation accommodations can include format variations such as fewer items per page, large print, and plain language editing procedures,

which use short sentences, common words, and active voice. There is wide variation in the types of accommodations used across states and school district.

When the possible use of an accommodation for a student is being considered, two questions should be examined: 1) What is being measured if conditions are accommodated? 2) What is being measured if the conditions remain the same? The decision to use an accommodation or not should be grounded in the ultimate goal of collecting test information that accurately and fairly represents the knowledge and skills of the individual student on the intended constructs. The overarching concern should be that test score inferences accurately reflect the intended constructs rather than factors extraneous to the intent of the measurement (2000, 38-39).

The Disability Rights Advocates, a nonprofit organization, has developed a brief series of major topics and related questions that school personnel can ask themselves when making decisions about accommodations and alternative assessments for students with disabilities. While it is not meant to be comprehensive, the list provides a good starting point:

A. The nature of the student 's disabilities.

1. How does the disability affect the ability to take standardized tests?
2. Does the test penalize the student or his or her learning disability?
3. If the student has an emotional disability, what will be the effect and pressure of taking a standardized test on the demonstration of his or her ability?

B. The accommodations the student receives in the classroom.

1. Are these accommodations applicable to test taking?
2. If not, what other accommodations are available that can replace those classroom accommodations?
3. What sort of accountability (school or student) are the test results used for?

C. The standards being tested.

D. The student 's previous exposure to testing.

1. For students with emotional or behavioral disabilities, to what extent has the student faced the pressures of rigorous testing?

Factors Related to Accurately Testing Limited English Proficient Students

Language Proficiency

- The student's level of oral and written proficiency in English
- The student's proficiency in his or her home language
- The language of instruction

Cultural Issues

- Background experiences
- Perceptions of prior experiences
- Value systems

Schooling Issues

- The amount of formal elementary and secondary schooling in the student's home country, if applicable, and in U.S. schools
- Consistency of schooling
- Instructional practices in the classroom

Factors Related to Accurately Testing Students with Disabilities

Disability Issues

- Types of impairments
- Severity of impairments

Schooling Experiences

- Overlap of individualized educational goals and general education curricula in elementary and secondary schooling
- Pace of schooling
- Instructional practices in the classroom

Source: *The Use of Tests as Part of High-Stakes Decision-Making for Students: A Resource Guide for Educators and Policy-makers.* 2000. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. Online: www.ed.gov/offices/OCR/testing/TestingResource.pdf.

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2. Does the test design disadvantage the student with his disabilities? For instance, if the test is multiple choice, a student with dyslexia who relies on context may not be fairly assessed even with accommodations and may require an alternate assessment.

E. The accommodations listed on the IEP or Section 504 Plan.

F. The advantages and consequences of performance on the test.

G. Whether the exam or the standards being assessed directly test the student's disability. (If the answer is yes, then the student should receive an alternate assessment for at least that portion of the exam) (2001, 11).

Another excellent set of questions is available online (see Reetz, Ring, and Jacobs 1999). Titled "20 Ways to Examine Test Modifications," the article includes clear answers with suggestions for how appropriate modifications could be provided. For example:

- **Can the student do the same test at the same level as peers?** In some instances no modifications may be needed because the area of assessment is not one in which the student's disability has a detrimental effect.

- **Can the student do the same test with altered or more simple directions?** Students may be able to do the same test if the teacher underlines the key words of the directions, has the student paraphrase the directions before beginning the test, or provides directions in an alternative form such as reading them orally. Teachers may also allow the student to ask clarifying questions regarding the exam.

- **Can the student respond appropriately with an example provided?** On many tests, it may be possible to provide an example of how the student should respond to the questions by answering the first item or providing a sample

While many states provide their own guidelines for schools in the state, information provided by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction about testing modifications for students with limited English proficiency would be helpful to any school, and are also appropriate when making decisions about students with disabilities:

> A fundamental principle is to follow the type of instructional modifications used in the classroom. Modifications that are not routinely used during the instructional day and during classroom testing are not appropriate during state-mandated testing. A good guideline is to "test the way

you teach." For example, students who habitually need extended time for classroom assignments and tests will probably need extended time for state-mandated tests. Students may receive multiple test modifications if these modifications are part of routine instruction and testing for the student (1998).

Included in the *Resource Guide* developed by the Office of Civil Rights are lists of possible accommodations already implemented in some states. These lists could be used by school committees developing IEPs for students with disabilities or by staff determining how limited English proficient students will be tested. These lists are included on the following two pages.

Finally, there will be students who cannot participate in district or state standardized assessments even with accommodations or modifications, due to the extent of their disabilities or their inability to comprehend the English-based assessment. Some states are meeting the requirement to measure and report on the progress of these students by developing alternative—although still on grade level—assessments. For example, the test may be translated into Spanish. For other students, a realistic effort to measure individual progress may require more substantial changes. This could involve using an assessment typically used with younger students.

While this chapter is intended to provide a backdrop of information on assessment of limited English proficient students and students with disabilities, state-required assessment programs typically provide their own guidelines. In addition to helping schools understand the federal requirements, they may also include more specific requirements for schools in the state.

Accommodations Used by States

Listed here are many of the accommodations used in large-scale testing for limited English proficient students and students with disabilities. The list is not meant to be exhaustive, and its use in this document should not be seen as an endorsement of any specific accommodations. Rather, it is meant to provide examples of the types of accommodations that are being used with limited English proficient students and students with disabilities.

Source: *The Use of Tests as Part of High-Stakes Decision-Making for Students: A Resource Guide for Educators and Policy-makers.* 2000. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. Online: www.ed.gov/offices/OCR/testing/TestingResource.pdf. Adapted from: *Annual Survey: State Student Assessment Programs,* Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington DC, 1999.

Accommodations for Limited English Proficient Students

Presentation Format
Translation of directions into native language
Translation of test into native language
Bilingual version of test (English and native language)
Further explanation of directions
Plain language editing
Use of word lists/dictionaries
Bilingual dictionary
Large print

Administration Format
Oral reading in English
Oral reading in native language
Person familiar to students administers test
Clarification of directions
Use of technology
Alone, in study carrel
Separate room with small group
Extended testing time
More breaks
Extending sessions over multiple days

Response Format
Allow student to respond in writing in native language
Allow student to orally respond in native language
Allow student to orally respond in English
Use of technology

Response Format
Out-of-level testing
Alternate scoring of writing test

Accommodations Used by States (cont.)

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Presentation Format
Braille edition
Large-print editions
Templates to reduce visual field
Short-segment testing booklets
Key words highlighted in directions
Reordering of items
Use of spell checker
Use of word lists/dictionaries
Translated into sign language

Administration Format
Oral reading of questions
Use of magnifying glass
Explanation of directions
Audiotape directions or test items
Repeating of directions
Interpretation of directions
Videotape in American Sign Language
Interpreter signs test in front of classroom/student
Signing of directions
Amplification equipment
Enhanced lighting
Special acoustics
Alone in study carrel
Individual administration
In small groups
At home with appropriate supervision
In special education classes separate room
Off campus
Interpreter with teacher facing student; student in front of classroom
Adaptive furniture
Use place marker
Hearing aids
Student wears noise buffers
Administrator faces student
Specialized table
Auditory trainers

Administration Format (cont.)
Read questions aloud to self
Colored transparency
Assist student in tracking by placing student's finger on item
Typewriter device to screen out sounds
Extended testing time
More breaks
Extending sessions over multiple days
Altered time of day that test is administered

Response Format
Mark responses in booklet
Use template for recording
Point to response
Lined paper
Use sign language
Use typewriter/computer/word processor
Use Braille writer
Oral response, use of scribe
Alternative response methods, use of scribe
Answers recorded on audiotape
Administrator checks to ensure that student is placing responses in correct area
Lined paper for large script printing
Communication board

Response Format
Out-of-level testing

Source: *The Use of Tests as Part of High-Stakes Decision-Making for Students: A Resource Guide for Educators and Policy-makers.* 2000. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. Online: www.ed.gov/offices/OCR/testing/TestingResource.pdf. Adapted from: *Annual Survey: State Student Assessment Programs,* Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington DC, 1999.

Federal Policies on Including Students with Disabilities in Assessment Programs

Introduction

1. Why do federal laws require that children with disabilities be included in state and district-wide assessment programs?

Requirements for including children with disabilities in assessments are based on a number of federal laws. These laws recognize that assessment is often connected to student benefits such as moving to the next grade or graduating. These laws also view assessment as important in holding schools accountable for the success of all children. Because assessments are linked to benefits, excluding children with disabilities from assessments may violate these federal laws.

This memorandum focuses on two federal laws—The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ("IDEA") and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act ("Title I"). These two laws have specific requirements for including children with disabilities in assessments. Congress added these requirements because it found that many students were not doing well enough in school to be successful as adults. Students with disabilities, minority children, migrant and homeless children, children with limited English proficiency, and children in poverty were especially at risk. For many of these children, school programs were marked by low expectations, limited accountability for results, and exposure to a poorer curriculum than was offered to other children. Congress found that "the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access in the general curriculum to the maximum extent possible."

2. How will participation in assessment programs benefit children with disabilities?

Participation of students with disabilities in state and local assessments is not participation just for the sake of participation. These assessments should help improve teaching and learning by creating high expectations and accountability for the success of all students. Participation in assessments should also promote access to the general curriculum, allowing children with disabilities to learn what other students are learning.

It is critically important that schools know how successful they are in preparing all students to meet high standards. Parents need to know this as well.

Parental Permission

3. Is parental permission required for children with disabilities to participate in state and district-wide assessment programs?

In most states, parental permission is not required for students to participate in state and local assessment programs. Whatever rules apply to non-disabled children in a state would also apply to children with disabilities.

4. Can parents choose not to have their child participate in state or district-wide assessments?

If a state lets parents of non-disabled children "opt out" of assessment programs, then parents of children with disabilities would have the same right. However, parents and students should know the consequences of opting out of state or local assessments. For example, parents should know that state and district-wide assessments can improve accountability and promote better services, while opting out may limit opportunities for moving to the next grade, graduating, or benefiting from school programs.

The IEP Process

5. What is the role of the IEP team in state or district-wide assessments?

Under IDEA, the IEP team, which always includes a parent or parent representative, determines how the child participates in state and district-wide assessments of student achievement.

The IEP team cannot exempt children with disabilities from participating in these assessment programs.

6. What happens if a student with a disability cannot participate in an assessment in the usual way?

The IEP team determines if any changes in administration are needed in order for the student to participate in the assessment. These changes are called different things in different states, and federal laws use several different terms such as "accommodations" and "modifications." Basically, these terms mean changes in the way a test is presented, the way a student responds, the setting in which a student takes a test, the timing and schedule for the test, or other similar changes.

7. What happens if a student with a disability cannot participate in the assessment even with an accommodation or modification?

IDEA requires that alternate assessments must be provided for students with disabilities who cannot participate in state or district-wide assessments. Alternate assessments are discussed more fully below. If the IEP team determines that the child will not participate in a state or local assessment (or part of an assessment), the IEP team states why the assessment is not appropriate for the child and how the child will be assessed.

8. What is "out-of-level" testing?

"Out-of-level" or "off-level" testing means testing students at one grade level using versions of tests that were designed for students at other grade levels. For example, a student in the 8th grade may be given a version of the test designed for the 5th grade. Some states allow out-of-level testing as an accommodation or modification. IDEA does not ban the use of out-of-level testing, but this approach has certain weaknesses. Out-of-level testing may lower expectations, prevent students from showing their full abilities, and keep students in a lower-level curriculum with limited opportunities. It may even limit opportunities for moving to the next grade or graduating with a diploma. If out-of-level tests are used, IEP teams need to think carefully about these issues. Also, if out-of-level tests are used, the scores should be converted to show the student's performance at his or her actual grade level if possible, so expectations and standards will be kept as high as possible for the student.

9. Can the IEP statement of how the child will participate in state and district-wide assessments be changed without reconvening the IEP team?

No. If the IEP team wishes to change a provision of the IEP, it must meet again to make the change.

10. Why is it important to consider the consequences of decisions about accommodations and modifications in assessments?

IDEA gives the IEP team the authority to determine what, if any, accommodations or modifications are needed in order for a child with a disability to participate in an assessment. However, state and local school agencies have the authority to determine how test scores are reported and used, and they may limit the use of test scores if certain accommodations or modifications are involved. When selecting individual accommodations and modifications, parents, students, and other IEP team members must understand how their decisions will affect the use of the scores. These decisions may affect the student's chances for such things as moving to the next grade or graduating with a regular diploma.

Federal Policies on Including Students with Disabilities in Assessment Programs

Alternate Assessments

11. What is an alternate assessment?

An alternate assessment is an assessment designed for students with disabilities who are unable to participate in a general assessment, even when accommodations or modifications are provided. The alternate assessment is a way for students, including those with the most significant disabilities, to participate in and benefit from assessment programs.

12. Which students should receive an alternate assessment?

The need for alternate assessments depends on the individual needs of the child, not the category of the child's disability. The alternate assessment is not just appropriate for students with significant cognitive impairments. It is expected that only a relatively small number of students will participate in alternate assessments.

In many instances, the alternate assessment will lead to an IEP diploma or other special type of certification. However, some states may decide that the alternate assessment can be given to the very small number of difficult-to-assess students with disabilities who need the alternate assessment to earn benefits such as a regular diploma.

13. What should be the content of an alternate assessment?

Alternate assessments need to line up with the general curriculum standards set for all students. This means that these assessments should test the same broad content areas (such as communication, mathematics, social studies, science, etc.) covered in the general assessment. Alternate assessments may test additional content, including functional skills.

Reporting and Accountability

14. How are the results of assessments supposed to be reported and used?

IDEA and Title I both have requirements for how school systems must use the results of assessment programs. IDEA requires that states must set goals for themselves, and these goals must include the performance of students with disabilities on assessments, as well as drop-out and graduation rates. States must report to the federal government and the public every two years on their progress in meeting their goals.

Title I requires that states must use assessment systems to see if schools and school districts are helping all students reach high standards. Title I requires that students with disabilities must be included in these state systems, and that the scores from alternate assessments must be included.

IDEA requires states to report to the public on the performance of students with disabilities on regular and alternate assessments. These reports must be as frequent and as detailed as reports on nondisabled students. Scores for individual students with disabilities must not be revealed in these public reports. But, individual scores can be revealed in private reports to teachers and parents.

IEP teams can consider individual results from state and district-wide assessments as they develop IEPs for students with disabilities. Parents can also check public reports to help hold schools accountable for having high expectations for all students.

Source: Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, U.S. Department of Education. January 2001. *Federal Policies on Including Students with Disabilities in Assessment Programs.* Online: www.dssc.org/frc/fed/OSEP01-06.FFAssessment.pdf.

Notes, Reminders, and Ideas

Using Assessment Data to Improve Instruction

"Testing is here to stay, accept it. What we need to figure out is how do we use the data to help and the test to instruct" (Bob Barr, Center for School Improvement, as quoted in Danitz 2001).

As principals and teachers across the country gain experience with state-mandated tests, they are beginning to use the data—or data from formative assessments designed to support the testing effort—to improve instruction. This may take the form of providing extra help long before the test day for students who need it. Or teachers may use the information to help them better focus on what they teach and how they teach it.

Analyzing and Reporting Results

- ☐ Avoid the "trap" of viewing the test as no more than a big club
- ☐ Focus on the educational purposes of assessment:
  - Monitoring progress
  - Pinpointing needs
  - Improving instruction

Gray provides some specific recommendations for where a principal should begin the process of using assessment data to improve student performance:

You must first evaluate your school's most recent scores. Acquiring the information you need is not difficult....The challenge is to locate what's

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> most useful in a vast amount of data. If you know where to look, you can identify relevant facts, compare results, and draw conclusions....After you've analyzed the data, you should compile a simple statistical comparison of potential and performance for each grade level in your school. It's helpful to discuss the results with groups of grade-level teachers. This gives them an opportunity to understand what the scores reveal about students' academic strengths and weaknesses [and] to establish strategies for improvement (1999, 47-48).

In addition to questions about the value of a specific assessment to providing data for instructional improvement, there is a growing realization that teachers will need support in learning how to "make full use of new information about student learning and translate it into improved instruction" (Research and Policy Committee of the Committee for Economic Development 2001, 15). Principals may find that, while their teachers are willing to integrate state standards into their curriculum, they need help in how to develop that integration without simply "teaching to the test" (Allen 2000, 16).

A study conducted by the Washington State Department of Public Instruction found that one element common in schools that made greater-than-average gains in mathematics performance was curriculum alignment:

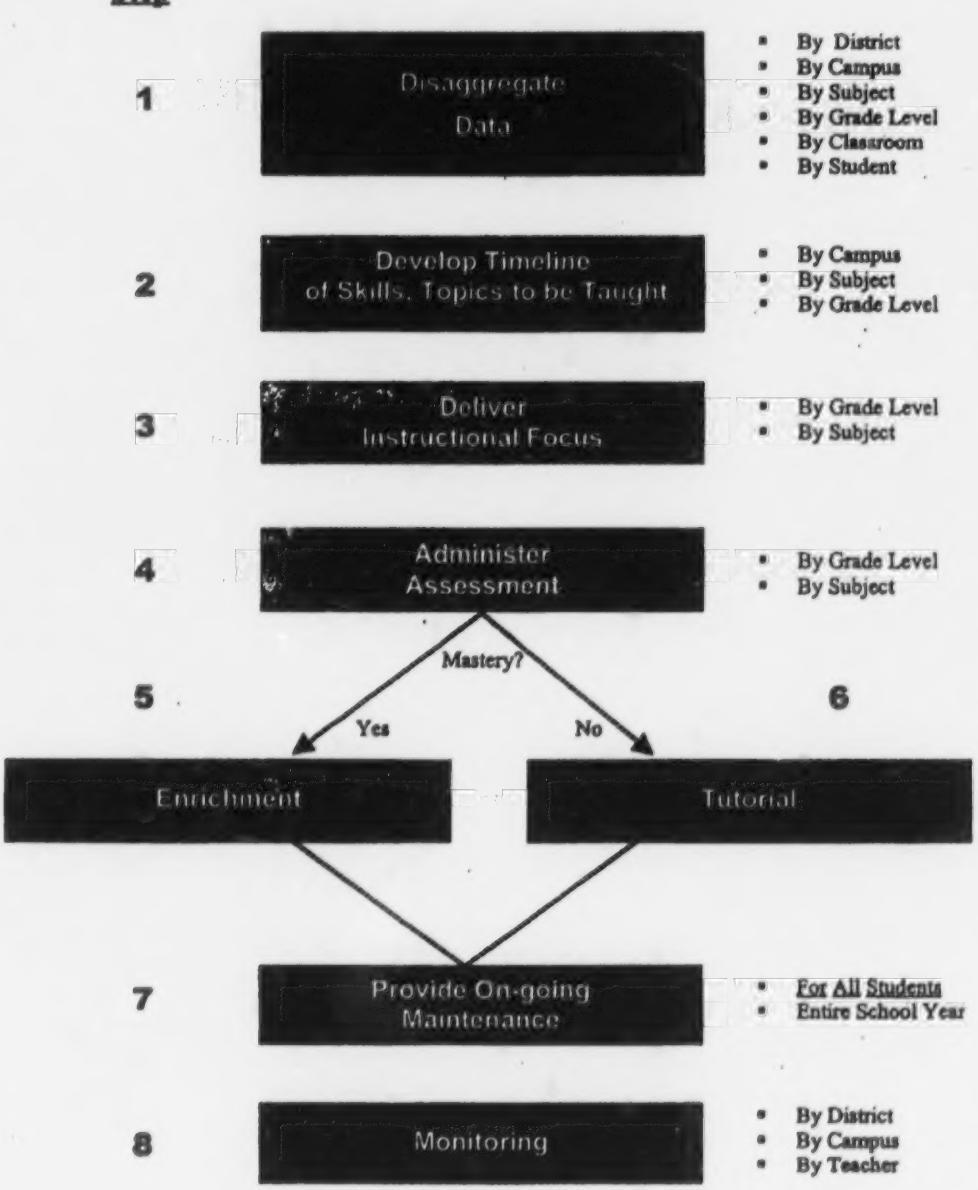
> Successful schools made changes in their curriculum and instruction to align them with state standards and assessments. Alignment of the mathematics program...was more important than any one program or text....Instructional strategies such as problem solving, group work, and more instruction related to mathematics communications skills (e.g., writing) were chosen because they support the standards (Bergeson et al. 2000, ii).

This "test prep" activity was supported by extensive staff development and efforts to identify and support students in special need of help.

Using the Data

The experiences of the Brazosport Independent School District when statewide accountability testing was first introduced in Texas provide a helpful and very concrete example of how to use assessment data to improve instruction. Many of the district's schools did not do well in the first assessment. Educators knew that they needed to find more effective ways to identify and meet student needs. As part of its strategy, the district reviewed the test data to find teachers who were currently demonstrating success with having high percentages of poor children meet the standards. The model that one second-grade teacher was using evolved into the district's "8-Step

Brazosport Independent School District
8 Step Instructional Process



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Instructional Process" (see page 55). Details on activities included in each of the eight steps include:

- **Disaggregate data:** Teachers receive individual student and classroom reports on TAAS results for both their previous year's class and the students they will teach during the current year. Principals receive the same information. Data are also available from periodic assessments developed by teachers in the district.

- **Develop a timeline:** Based on both the knowledge and skills in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills and the assessment data available from the TAAS, grade-level teachers develop an objective-based teaching calendar for the year.

- **Deliver instructional focus:** The timeline is used by each teacher to identify the objective to be taught during specific time periods. The instructional focus—the objective—is announced and taught at the beginning of each day or class period.

- **Administer an assessment:** Assessments, some commercially developed and many developed by district teachers, are administered periodically to ensure students have mastered the objectives taught during the specified time period. Data from these are used to determine if whole classes need additional reteaching or if special assistance is needed for specific students. The approach is intended to help teachers detect and correct problems early.

At this point students will be provided with either enrichment activities or tutorials to reteach.

- **Enrichment activities:** These are provided for those students whose short-term assessment shows they have mastered the skills just taught. They are scheduled during the time other students are involved with tutorials.

- **Tutorials to reteach:** These are provided to students who have not mastered the objectives just assessed. The tutorials typically include fewer students than a regular class. Help is also provided after-school and on Saturdays.

- **Maintain and reteach:** Teachers include short, periodic reteaching/maintenance activities in their instruction to ensure that skills already taught are retained.

- **Monitor:** Principals visit classrooms during the time allotted for the instructional focus to monitor progress and to maintain knowledge of the progress of individual students and classes.

The model, as it is currently applied in Brazosport, has evolved into more than a structure. It is a state of mind embedded in the daily life of principals, teachers, and schools. However, even with extensive staff development provided by the district, it took a while for school staff to learn how to use the approach effectively. One principal commented that the approach to using the TAAS was "scattergun" in the beginning and that the development of TAAS-like diagnostic assessments that are administered periodically help teachers target instruction more effectively:

> It used to be that we would decide at the beginning of the year who would need tutorials. Now we look at the data from the periodic assessments to decide who needs what and when. The tutorials can be more targeted, in terms of both the objectives covered and the students who attend.

Currently, data drives *what* instruction is provided, to *whom*, *when*, and *how*. For example, grade-level teams might regroup their students for short tutorial periods on a daily basis, with small groups of students focusing on the skills specifically needed (Cawelti and Protheroe 2001). Several schools have reorganized their staffing so that a master teacher—or facilitator—is available to help teachers and teacher teams review data and brainstorm ways to meet the needs of individual students.

Standards-based assessments have been developed and are given periodically through the year. The intent is clear: student needs for additional help, extra time, or alternative teaching strategies will not be left unmet through the year and then "discovered" when the high-stakes test is given and the student fails to meet the standards. Instead, assessment data are used continuously to identify student needs and to improve instruction.

While principals and teachers speak frankly of the effort needed to build the system, they are now seeing positive results. Principals support teachers through careful organization of the schedule to provide time for teachers to meet together. In addition, the school schedules are structured so that students who need extra help do not miss out on regular instruction while receiving it.

Notes, Reminders, and Ideas

Explaining Test Scores to Parents

Schools have always used testing as one way to measure student learning, and parents have always been interested in the information about their children that test scores provide. In recent years, however, the interest has turned to both anxiety and confusion for many parents. Put yourself in the place of parents who hear much of what they know about tests through the local newspaper, and it is easy to understand why.

Student testing is receiving increased attention. Many states have recently established new standards and high-stakes testing programs that can have a profound impact on a student's ability to move to the next grade or to graduate. Parents often have no clear idea of what these standards are, where they came from, or what their child's scores mean. Yet, neighborhood schools may be graded as "good" or "failing" based on their students' scores.

Education leaders have the difficult job of dealing with accountability pressures while keeping their schools focused on testing to improve student learning. Parents can be partners in this task, if educators make the effort to keep them informed about tests and test scores.

This chapter discusses what the research says about the importance of explaining testing to parents in a clear, jargon-free way. It then provides some suggestions about what parents need to know and how to communicate with them effectively about the emotionally charged issue of testing and test scores.

Why Providing Accurate Information Is Important

Helping parents to understand testing and test scores is just one component of the ongoing home-school communication that should be part of every educator's job. Two primary purposes can serve as a framework for this communication:

- **To give parents feedback on their child's progress.** Unless parents are provided with "comprehensible information about their children's achievement...they are prohibited from helping their children learn and may become disenfranchised from educational decision making" (Barber et al. 1992, 15). An adequate understanding of test scores, along with other information about a child's progress, provides important background for parents to discuss critical issues such as their child's need for special assistance or program placement. "Parents who have full, useful reports on their children's achievement have a starting point for meaningful conversations with schools" (Watts, Gaines, and Creech 1998, 10).

- **To engage parents as partners in the learning process.** Parents who understand the meaning of test results are often better able to help their children. For example, if a child's test scores indicate that he is able to read words but is less proficient at understanding the meaning of text, the teacher might suggest that the parent ask him to summarize main ideas in stories he reads at home.

The What and How of the Message

In *Talking About Tests*, the National Education Goals Panel (1998) identifies several elements that should be included in communications to parents about new standards-based testing being introduced in many states. All of the recommendations provide good general direction for schools trying to educate parents about testing issues:

- Address parent's concerns up front (this could include issues such as what the test will cover or whether students' scores will be included in their permanent records).

- Help parents understand why scores may be low in the beginning and what will be done to improve scores over time.

- Place the new test in perspective; don't overstate the importance of the new test, and don't overstate the failings of more traditional tests.

- Answer questions thoughtfully and honestly.

- Provide examples of what students need to know and be able to do.

- Provide examples of test questions and of student responses (those that meet the standard, those that do not meet the standard, and explanations as to why).

- Use clear and concise language to define technical terms; avoid jargon.

- Provide suggestions parents can use to encourage their children to develop their skills and knowledge and improve their academic performance.

The method used to communicate with parents is as important as the content of the communication. Roeber suggests that a combination of four strategies is most effective: individual parent/teacher conferences, an individual written report sent home, parent group meetings, and a parent newsletter. He explains: "In all types of reports, the information should include how well an individual student did on the assessment and what steps the educator will take to make improvements in instruction so that the student will learn what is needed. Written reports should include information concerning how parents can actively participate in a plan of action to address the instructional needs of their child" (1995).

Why Are You Testing My Child?

Helping parents to understand the testing process used by schools might begin by answering the question, "Why are you testing my child?" Answering this "why" question is built into the first phase of a three-step plan for reporting test results suggested by the Michigan Department of Education (1998).

Step 1—A background report issued before test results are available should provide information about the purpose of the testing program, how results are being used, and how the scores fit within the context of other information about the school. It prepares the audience—which includes parents as well as other community members—to understand the test results, and includes some sample test items.

Step 2—The report of test results addresses some key points: How did we do this year? Did achievement improve over last year? If so, why? If not, why not? What will be done to review and use the results? "It is as important to report low or declining scores as it is to report high or improving scores. Discussing the full set of test results, including strengths and weaknesses, and planned follow-up activities can often help your schools avoid the appearance the district is 'covering up' or ignoring problems."

Step 3—The follow-up report outlines action to be taken or decisions made after reviewing the test results. For example, if the school decided to implement a special summer program for students who did poorly on the test, this report could describe the program and suggest that children who needed additional instruction should attend.

Using Parent-Teacher Conferences for Communication about Tests

When asked in a recent study what information they found most useful in learning about their child's progress in school, parents favored talking with their child's teacher rather than getting report cards or standardized test results (Shepard and Bliem 1995). This personal contact provided them with the opportunity to ask questions about both their child's progress and the educational program in general. The parent-teacher connection is a potentially valuable resource for schools and districts interested in informing parents about the testing process.

What Do Parents Want to Know about Test Results?

How did my child do?

What skills/knowledge does he or she know or not know?

How did he/she perform in comparison to other children?

What can I do to help him/her do better?

Elements essential to creating a "powerful parent-teacher conference" were identified by the Kentucky Department of Education in its efforts to educate parents about the new state assessment. These guidelines—and the activities the state designed to ensure that teachers had the information they needed to accurately and effectively communicate with parents—provide helpful direction for schools (National Education Goals Panel 1998, 27).

- Make sure teachers know the purpose of the state assessment. (The Kentucky model includes both printed material and people whom teachers can contact to ask specific questions.)

- Make sure that teachers know how to accurately read the report and can communicate the results to parents. (Teachers and parents were included in focus groups that provided suggestions on the content and format of the reports used to release test scores; school personnel were provided with "interpretive guides" to help them understand and explain the data.)

- Make sure teachers know how to tell parents about results that are not good. (Teachers might explain why poor results may vary from other indicators of the student's learning, discuss what is planned to improve weak areas, and identify areas of strength.)

Since parents may be confused about test scores that seem to present a different picture of their child than other indicators such as school grades, discussion among teachers prior to parent-teacher conferences may help prepare them to answer the parents' questions. If students in general are scoring less well on the assessment than school grades indicate, the answers might focus on how the content of the assessment compares to the curriculum being taught. If, on the other hand, the discrepancy between test scores and grades is specific to a child, a discussion between the parent and teacher might help to identify the reasons and lead to suggestions about how to address the problem.

In discussing statewide tests or other tests given to a large group of students, parents are often interested in knowing how their child compares to others. Eissenberg and Rudner suggest that teachers be prepared to talk with parents about the comparison group, perhaps providing some details about how the child is "similar or dissimilar to other students in the group" (1988, 2).

In one Illinois school district, talking about test scores has long been an important part of the fall parent-teacher conference. Teachers are given a profile of each student that includes "a narrative and chart outlining which tests the student has taken; how the student's cognitive ability places him nationwide among students; and how the student scores in reading vocabulary and comprehension, spelling, language mechanics and expression, mathematics computation and application, and reference skills. The student's strong and weak points are listed and graphed." These profiles personalize the results of impersonal testing sessions. The parent-teacher conferences are effective in explaining the tests to parents, answering questions, and discussing mutual concerns (Carpenter 1983, 44).

The district's experience with including the reporting of test scores to parents in parent-teacher conferences also convinced the district of the importance of providing teachers with training that will help them to communicate the information accurately. Suggested staff development topics to help teachers gain the knowledge and skills they need include:

- the meaning of percentiles or other measures used to report test results;
- the purposes of specific tests;
- descriptions of each test the school uses;
- information about the relative accuracy of test scores;
- an explanation of why some students earn low test scores and high grades, while others earn high scores and low grades;
- the difference between aptitude and achievement;

- what parents can do to help their children improve test scores.

The goal of these sessions should be preparing teachers to present scores "in a way that allows parents to evaluate their children's progress objectively" (Carpenter 1983, 44).

A final reminder for teachers and administrators who are meeting with parents to discuss student test scores: for many parents, test scores are a very personal and emotionally charged issue. Scores that are low, especially those that are unexpectedly low, are not good news. Educators must be prepared to offer constructive suggestions for what all parties—the student, educators, and parents—can do to help improve the student's performance.

Preparing for Frequently Asked Questions

If certain questions about testing are asked repeatedly, it may be productive to develop answers to each of them that can be used for parent newsletters that accompany information about test scores as well as in discussions with individual parents. Below are just a few possibilities that could be adapted to your own situation:

- **Why are students in this district tested so much?**

  Each test that we give serves a different purpose and gives us a different perspective on student achievement. For example, a district test can be used to evaluate whether students are mastering the district curriculum, but not how well our students compare to students nationally. Conversely, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills compares the performance of our district's students to students nationally but, because it does not directly match up with the our curriculum, it is not the best measure of how well students are learning all that is being taught in their classrooms (Mesa Public Schools 1996, 6).

- **Why did so many schools in the state do so poorly on the new state tests?**

  We have just begun to teach the specific content that is included on the test. This first set of scores provides us with helpful information on the areas of instruction we need to strengthen. The goal of the state assessment program is to set high standards that require improvement; our goal locally is to improve our student scores gradually over the next few years.

- **Who decided what questions were included on the test my daughter just took?**

  That was a norm-referenced test developed by a test publisher. This publisher hires specialists in the subject areas included on the test—in this

case, reading and math—and experts in test development to write items that students at your child's grade level would be expected to be able to answer. The test was designed for use by schools all across the country, so some of the questions cover material we don't teach at her grade level in this school. The results are still useful, since they let us compare what our students can do to a much larger group of students.

The test your daughter will take in the spring is different. That one was developed by people in this state and includes only questions about material that is included in the state curriculum.

- **The report I got with my son's test scores for the new test looked different than those I received before. How is this test different?**

  This new test is what we call criterion-referenced. Questions have been developed to measure how well students are learning what we are teaching. The developers of the test decided how many questions needed to be answered correctly for an individual student to "pass" the test. The report you received tells you what parts of the test your son passed instead of how he compares to a larger group of students. For these subjects, it shows that he has mastered the material expected of students at his grade level. \

- **I saw our district's ranking of schools in the newspaper. Why is there such a big difference among the schools on how well students did on the test?**

  To explain a complicated issue in simple terms, there are two main things that make a difference. First, of course, is the quality of the instruction the students receive—both how good the teaching is, and how careful the school is to teach what is actually included on the test. The second involves the characteristics of the students. Just think about two schools. One is in an upper-middle-class community where students have many books at home and where families tend to stay in the same neighborhood and school year after year. The other is in a poor neighborhood, and the children may move two or three times while they are in elementary school and have to adjust to a new school each time. Both schools have the responsibility to teach their students—but the second school has a tougher challenge.

- **I'm confused. In the school my daughter used to attend, the test report told me how she compared to other students, but the report I just received at this school said only that she had "passed" reading and math.**

  For the first test that your daughter took, her score was ranked against the results from a large group of students—the "norm" group. The report you

received said something like "82nd percentile in reading." That meant that she did better than 81 percent of the students in the norm group. This new test has been designed for a different purpose. The state first decided what knowledge and skills were important for students at her grade level to know, and then designed a test to measure whether students had mastered the knowledge and skills. On this test, a student has to answer a specific number of questions correctly to "pass." With a test like this, it doesn't matter if your daughter did better than other students—ony that she learned the required material.

—Preventing Misunderstandings

A good plan to convey accurate information also includes strategies to guard against misunderstandings or misinformation. In one state, it was reported that "the strongest opposition to [changes in] assessments came from parents, mostly because of misinformation and misunderstanding." The educational policy makers involved in that experience advise that: "Communication with parents is vital. Keep it simple, honest, and direct" (The Business Roundtable 1998, 18).

Some of the suggestions already discussed in this chapter can help guard against misunderstandings. Providing information about a test to parents—its content, the reason it is given, how the results will be reported—before the test results are published encourages a focus on the process before the more emotional response to actual scores gets in the way of understanding.

Especially in states where new standards-based assessments are being implemented, experience shows that it is useful to prepare parents by describing ways in which the new test is different from the old one, with special attention given to how results on the two might differ since they measure different skills in a different way (Fuhrman 1999, 3).

Results from a survey of Michigan parents suggest that it may also be useful to periodically assess parents' understanding about tests used and information the scores provide. When asked about the criterion-referenced Michigan Educational Assessment Program, only 18 percent of the parents understood that the percentage score reported for their child represented the percent of objectives mastered. Many of the parents of the 90 percent of Michigan students who passed 85 percent of the objectives in reading and mathematics assumed that the score indicated that their child's performance was among the top 15 percent of students throughout the state. This misunderstanding was present even though a pamphlet provided to parents included "specific information on how to interpret test results" (Barber et al. 1992, 18).

Helping Your Child Prepare for Standardized Writing Tests

- Encourage your child to express himself or herself in writing. Creating anecdotal scrapbooks, family newsletters and histories, autobiographies, original stories, diaries, journals, shopping lists, greeting cards, invitations, menus, and travel logs are just a few of the ideas that work well to encourage writing in the home.
- Praise your child's writing efforts and respond to the message. Talk about the things your like. Display your child's writing and demonstrate that you enjoy and value it.
- Provide help if your child asks for it but leave final decisions about writing to the writer. Some things to consider: Are there any places where the meaning is not clear? Could the ideas be placed in a better order? Are there any details that could be left out?
- Model good grammar for your child. An oral game with your child during a short car ride or while waiting in a line is a good way to have fun and build skills simultaneously. Give a statement said in both correct and incorrect grammar and have your child indicate which is correct.
- Talk with your child. Ask your child questions, discuss experiences, give explanations, and really listen when your child talks to you by summarizing what you have heard.
- Teach your child to be observant. Have your child watch for poor spelling, incorrect grammar, and punctuation and capitalization problems in the environment. Occasionally produce a written document that you know to have errors on the developmental level of your child. Make a game out of their detective work to find YOUR errors.

Source: Excerpted from *A Parent's Guide to Virginia's Stanford Achievement Test: An Overview and Helpful Hints for Home Activities to Assist the Elementary School-age Child.* 1997. Portsmouth Public Schools, Portsmouth, Virginia.

Helping Your Child Prepare for Standardized Mathematics Tests

- Ask your child's teacher about the kinds of help that you as a parent can provide in reinforcing and helping your child practice basic mathematical skills.
- Encourage your child to restate what a mathematical word problem is all about—the information it gives and the information it asks for. Putting it in the child's own words will help clarify it.
- Ask your child to explain how a problem was solved. Consider the following: 1) While problems in mathematics may have only one solution, there may be many ways to get the right answer. By encouraging your child to talk about what he/she is thinking, you will help them to become stronger mathematicians and independent thinkers. 2) Wrong answers can help! Sometimes, the wrong answer to a problem might be because the child thinks the problem is asking another question. For example, in the problem 4+_= 9, a child might answer "13," thinking the problem is asking, "What is 4+9?" instead of "4 plus what missing amount equals 9?" Always stress the importance of reading the problem carefully.
- Help your child do mental math, starting with lots of small numbers in his/her head, until the responses become quick and accurate. Ask questions such as, "If I have 8 tickets and I need 17, how many more do I need?"
- Encourage your child to estimate answers. When estimating, emphasize using numbers to make it easy to solve problems quickly and mentally to get a reasonable answer. For example, when figuring 18 plus 29, an easy way to get a "close" answer is to think about 20+30, or 50.
- Ask often, "Is your answer reasonable?" Is it reasonable to add 17 and 35 and get 367? Why? Why not?
- Give your child opportunities to practice measurement skills. On the Stanford, students will have to use rulers to determine measurements in solving problems.
- Help your child be a risk taker. Stress the importance of trying to solve a problem even if you're not completely sure of how to solve it.

Source: Excerpted from *A Parent's Guide to Virginia's Stanford Achievement Test: An Overview and Helpful Hints for Home Activities to Assist the Elementary School-age Child.* 1997. Portsmouth Public Schools, Portsmouth, Virginia.

Providing Suggestions for Parents

Parents who want to be active partners in their child's educational process often ask, "What can I do to help her do better on the test?" While much of the specific content of most standardized tests does not lend itself to training at home, schools can still provide some direction for these parents. Portsmouth Public Schools in Virginia included in its Parent's Guide to the Stanford Achievement Test, "Helpful Hints for Home Activities to Assist the School-age Child," which lists activities for each portion of the test. For example, in math, some hints include:

- Help your child do mental math, starting with lots of small numbers, in his/her head, until the responses become quick and accurate. Ask questions such as, "If I have 8 tickets and I need 17, how many more do I need?"

- Help your child be a risk taker. Stress the importance of trying to solve a problem even if you're not completely sure how to do it.

Regular participation in activities such as these at home extends learning time for students and can provide benefits beyond merely raising test scores. Many parents are ready and willing to help if they are provided with direction.

Other suggestions for parents could include less-academic but still helpful hints. For example,

- Avoid test anxiety. Try not to appear anxious about your child's test scores. Do not put too much emphasis on the scores.

- Make sure your child is well-rested before taking a standardized test.

Encouraging parents to support their children in the high-stakes testing process provides benefits for both the students and the schools.

Another helpful suggestion that can be made to parents is, "Don't be overly anxious about test scores, but encourage your child to take tests seriously" (Bagin and Rudner 1996). The second portion of this suggestion can be especially important for parents of older students. Teachers often report that, unless these students understand that a test is "high stakes," many of them put less effort into the test than into work on which they know they will be graded.

Given current trends in public education policy, school leaders can expect to deal with continuing parental concern and even anxiety about testing. Providing accurate, relevant information to parents can enlist them as informed and helpful partners in efforts to improve student achievement.

The information presented in this chapter can be distilled into some basic guidelines. First, be sensitive to parents' concerns—remember that test scores can be a source of intense pride for some parents, and of confusion or disappointment for others. Make sure that you and your teachers understand the content of the test as well as the processes used to develop it, to score student work, and to report results. Present the results honestly and clearly. Be prepared to talk about the educational implications of a student's scores, as well as actions the student, parents, and schools can take to improve areas of weakness—and to celebrate together the things the student does well.

Notes, Reminders, and Ideas

The Role of the Principal

Aspects of the principal's role in relation to high-stakes testing are embedded throughout this guide. However, the issues related to high-stakes testing are so important that several organizations, NAESP and NASSP among them, have developed *Competency Standards in Student Assessment for Educational Administrators.* They include:

Competencies associated with assisting teachers:

- Have a working level of competence in the *Standards for Teacher Competence in Educational Assessment of Students.*
- Know the appropriate and useful mechanics of constructing various assessments.

Competencies associated with providing leadership in developing and implementing assessment policies:

- Understand and be able to apply basic measurement principles to assessments conducted in school settings.
- Understand the purposes (e.g., description, diagnosis, placement) of different kinds of assessment (e.g., achievement, aptitude, attitude) and the appropriate assessment strategies to obtain assessment data needed for the intended purpose.
- Understand the need for clear and consistent building- and district-level policies on student assessment.

Competencies needed in using assessments in making decisions and communicating assessment results:

- Understand and express technical assessment concepts and terminology to others in nontechnical but correct ways.

- Understand and follow ethical and technical guidelines for assessment.
- Reconcile conflicting assessment results appropriately.
- Recognize the importance, appropriateness, and complexity of interpreting assessment results in light of students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds and other out-of-school factors and in light of making accommodations for individual differences, including disabilities, to help ensure the validity of assessment results for all students.
- Ensure that assessment and information technology are employed appropriately to conduct student assessment.
- Use available technology appropriately to integrate assessment results and other student data to facilitate students' learning, instruction, and performance.
- Judge the quality of an assessment strategy or program used for decision making within its jurisdiction.

While this list takes only a small amount of space, the complexity of what's involved can often be overwhelming. Herman suggests that effective school-based efforts to increase student achievement as measured by test scores focus on a few key elements:

- Identify and focus on a limited number of instructional priorities.
- Recognize that student fluency in reading grade-level materials is "the heart of the matter."
- Integrate basic skills instruction with opportunities for "meaning-making, complex thinking."
- Monitor student progress through the use of formative assessments.
- Provide extra time and attention to help students succeed through tutoring, afterschool programs, etc. (2000).

These "key elements" make it clear—instructional leadership, high levels of teacher knowledge about student needs and instruction, and a willingness for all staff to collaborate in developing a comprehensive approach will all be needed to successfully meet the challenges of high-stakes testing.

Notes, Reminders, and Ideas

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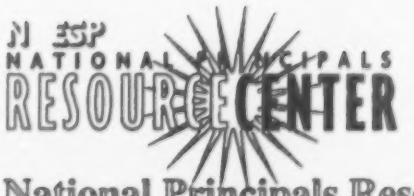

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